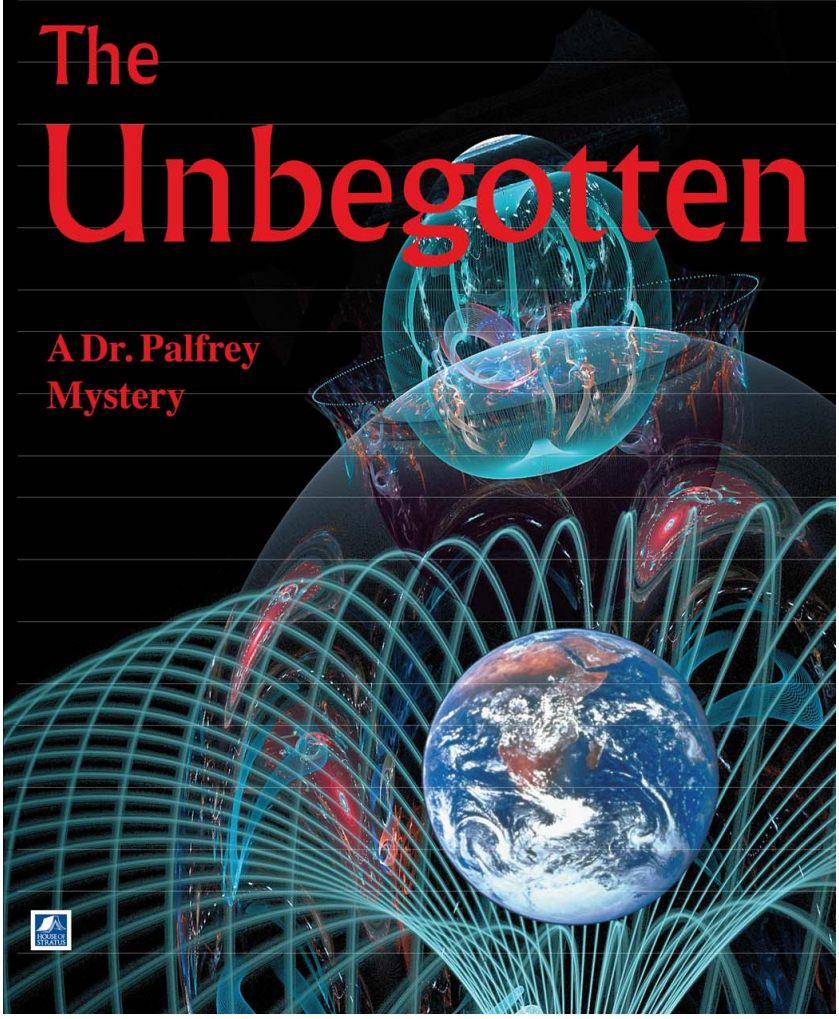
JOHN CREASEY

The Unbegotten

A Dr. Palfrey Mystery



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About the Author

John Creasey – Master Storyteller - was born in Surrey, England in 1908 into a poor family in which there were nine children, John Creasey grew up to be a true master story teller and international sensation. His more than 600 crime, mystery and thriller titles have now sold 80 million copies in 25 languages. These include many popular series such as *Gideon of Scotland Yard, The Toff, Dr Palfrey and The Baron*.

Creasy wrote under many pseudonyms, explaining that booksellers had complained he totally dominated the 'C' section in stores. They included:

> *Gordon Ashe, M E Cooke, Norman Deane, Robert Caine Frazer, Patrick Gill, Michael Halliday, Charles Hogarth, Brian Hope, Colin Hughes, Kyle Hunt, Abel Mann, Peter Manton, J J Marric, Richard Martin, Rodney Mattheson, Anthony Morton and Jeremy York.*

Never one to sit still, Creasey had a strong social conscience, and stood for Parliament several times, along with founding the *One Party Alliance* which promoted the idea of government by a coalition of the best minds from across the political spectrum.

He also founded the *British Crime Writers' Association*, which to this day celebrates outstanding crime writing. *The Mystery Writers of America* bestowed upon him the *Edgar Award* for best novel and then in 1969 the ultimate *Grand Master Award*. John Creasey's stories are as compelling today as ever.

Chapter One

THE LAST BORN

The mother lay exhausted on the big bed; the newborn babe, in the midwife's steady hands, lay on a white-draped table, crying weakly. Outside, the father, tall and young and emotion-torn, sat back in an old armchair, which had been in this cottage for generations. He looked almost as exhausted as his wife, his face porcelain white against the dense black of his hair.

The doctor, Reginald Maddern, M.D., who had served the village and dozens around for over twenty years yet was still in his middle-forties, moved across the bedroom as the midwife turned the infant over on its side, impersonal as if she were dealing with clay. Maddern was an ordinary-looking man with thinning, greying hair, tired eyes, a snub nose and a weak chin, if one judged it weak if a chin fell away into the neck.

'Well, Mrs. Cray,' he said in a strange, sad voice, 'that's the last.'

The midwife, taller than Maddern and with iron-grey, wiry hair and a strong, hatchet-like face looked at him with eyes as sharp as gimlets; there was hostility in her voice.

'I don't care what you say,' she stated. 'It's those pills.'

'I simply don't understand it,' Maddern said.

'I tell you, doctor, it's those pills.'

She was much older than he, and in many ways old-fashioned, although her methods and her habits at a delivery were immaculate in their hygiene. A first-class midwife, she had often attended confinements on her own. The doctor admired her professional skill and her unremitting loyalty to her patients, but she had fought 'the pill' since it had first been introduced to this backwater of England's West Country, and now she blamed it for the strangest fact in all Middlecombe's history.

There was no other baby on the way; no patient at the mobile clinic which called weekly on each village in the sprawling rural district to which Middlecombe gave its name. No woman here was pregnant in this period in the late twentieth century; none of the doctors in the three partnerships had a patient in need of pre-natal care. A few who had come into the district from outside, had been sent to Bristol, the nearest big city.

Nurse Cray blamed the pill.

It was useless to argue with her; she had already declared her belief that the pill was the sperm of the Devil, in whom she believed as entirely as she believed in the Holy Trinity. It was a waste of time pointing out to her that the pill brought freedom from anxiety and a pleasure commensurate with that of the husband in the solace of sex to many an over-burdened wife. Nurse Cray would talk darkly of *lovers.* She would tell Maddern in all but name of the women whom she knew betrayed their husbands with impunity.

She would talk of the young girls, seduced by young and not-so-young men, until she declared, sex became a habit as free from responsibility as a kiss.

She was, then, inexorably anti-pill.

'Doctor,' she said, her expression and her voice softening, 'it's time you went home and had a good sleep. I can do everything that's needed, here.'

And she could, much of it better than he.

'Maggie,' he said, frowning as if in pain, 'isn't there just *one*?'

'There isn't a woman in the whole of Middlecombe in the family way,' she stated flatly. 'I'd know it, if there were. You may believe it or not, but it's that pill.'

It couldn't be, although there must surely be some common cause. But not a doctor he knew had the faintest idea of that cause; they were baffled.

'I wish I knew,' he said. 'Do the other doctors talk about it much?'

'They remark on it,' she told him, 'and I tell them exactly what I tell you, Dr. Maddern. I don't blame any of you, mind, you didn't begin the accursed thing, but when man begins to interfere with nature, then he's inviting disaster. I tell you as I stand here, Dr. Maddern, the wrath of God has struck this sin-ridden part of the world and only the forgiveness of God can ever bring life back to normal.'

The baby's crying took on a new note, and she bent watchfully over it. The mother lay sleeping, wan, yet so obviously happy. Dr. Maddern rested a hand on the midwife's shoulder for a moment as he looked down at the child, clean and swaddled now, eyes hardly open, redness at the puckered lips. Then he went out abruptly, startling the father who was dozing in the next room.

'Doctor!'

'It's all right, Mr. Gunnison, they're both fine.'

'Thank God for that,' choked Michael Gunnison. 'I can't thank you enough, doctor.'

'You owe a lot more to Nurse Cray than you'll ever do to me.' Maddern stood, a little at a loss, wondering if this young man had any idea how unique he was. He did not know Michael Gunnison well, and had no basis on which to like or dislike him, although it was usually a good pointer to a man's nature if his wife had that constant and deep feeling for him which Jane Gunnison so obviously had for this man. If that had not been so, then there would have been some indication during the pregnancy, not necessarily in the form of direct complaint or outburst of confidence. There had not been the slightest indication, and this was their third child. He was a farm hand, the cottage was the farm's cottage, he earned only just enough to keep the family going. Yet Jane was happy.

'Can I get you something? Tea? Or coffee? Or *cider*?' The last seemed to be an inspiration. 'Yes, we've some cider!'

'Nothing, Mr. Gunnison, thank you,' Maddern declined. I'll look in some time tomorrow.'

Gunnison saw him to the door and waited with the electric light falling like a cloak on to his head and shoulders as Maddern walked the gravelled

path to the gate and his car: a Morris 1800, shining black. Once at the wheel, Maddern looked back. Gunnison was a ghost-like figure, lean and spindly, the last man one would expect to work on a farm, as his family had done for three generations.

'Good night!'

'Good night, doctor!'

Maddern drove off, feeling very strange, now that it was over. The situation had been peculiar ever since he had first realised that there were no other babies on the way, but nothing like as disconcerting as this. Until tonight there had been the unborn child, the cycle of birth, growing up, marriage and childbirth had continued: but now, over a surprisingly wide area, it had ceased.

Maddern actually shivered.

What *had* caused this awful barrenness?

He began to think of other patients, women with three, four or five children and every intention of having more, suddenly becoming barren. There was a small Roman Catholic community in Middlecombe itself, a very orthodox and faithful group with a priest who was as adamant against the pill as Nurse Cray. There had been no case of conception among the married couples in the parish for over eight months; no, over nine.

Good God! Why didn't he wake up to the way in which time was passing. And why hadn't a public enquiry been held? A large area of this part of England, with a population of over ten thousand people, was barren; like a desert, where human life was concerned. The situation had developed slowly, only in the past four or five months had the authorities woken up to the strangeness of the situation. Reports had been sent in to the Ministry of Health but red tape used up so much time. Doctors and local authorities now knew that there was no clear line of demarcation; several rural areas were concerned, but only Middlecombe had been struck so devastatingly as this.

Maddern gave a little shudder as he turned off the farm lane and headed for the town. Way up on the left was Torrent Farm, the big house itself still occupied by the Torrent family, as it had been for three hundred years. Heredity was important in this part of the world. Houses, land, skills and handicrafts were passed on from generation to generation.

But not any more.

Maddern reached the top of the hill which ran down into Middlecombe itself. He could see the lights in the High Street spreading out like an illuminated spider's web, some of the delicate strands broken, as in a storm. His house, on the far side of town, was one of the few with its porch light shining. His housekeeper refused to switch it off when he was out, no matter what time it was.

It was half past three, and the countryside lay quiet and dark. He had come to know it so well since Lilian and he had first set up house here, eager and excited, in his first practice. He had been the third, very junior partner, then.

Why was he so sensitive to pain tonight?

Lilian had been dead ten years. Their only child had died at the age of three, from leukaemia; the same dread weakening of the blood had lurked in the mother, too. One would think that he would get used to being without his wife, but at heart he knew that he would never become accustomed to the loneliness.

Hallo! The Comptons were still up. At *this* hour. He could see their bungalow at the end of a road leading off the High Street, the last one in Middlecombe proper. It was newly built, bright with freshly applied paint, for young Guy Compton had made startling progress as the representative of a big insurance company, specialising in farming and general agricultural cover. They had been married three years: Guy, and Belinda, handsomeness married to loveliness, a delightful young couple, *then*.

Nearly six months ago, Belinda had come to see him, distressed and in tears.

'Of course I love him, doctor, he's absolutely wonderful, but I *do* want children. I *know* it's not my fault, it must be something the matter with Guy.'

The series of tests and examinations had followed, and first Belinda and later Guy had gone to Bristol, and the best gynaecologists in the West Country had said they could see no reason why they should not have children; no reason at all.

But none had come to them, and now at half past three they were awake, with lights blazing all over the house. Were they all right? Maddern wondered. He was tempted to drive along and see, but that could be anticipating trouble, and if they had need of him they would telephone. Had they telephoned already, Bertha, his housekeeper, would have called the Gunnisons. That was one thing the Torrents allowed them in the isolated cottage; a telephone – oh, and electricity.

There were no messages when he reached his home, which was called Hallows End. He warmed some milk, ate sandwiches which Bertha had left out for him, and went to bed. But it was a long time before he dropped off to sleep. When he wasn't seeing that newborn babe and its father in his mind's eye, he was thinking about the Comptons.

'It must be your fault!' cried Belinda Compton. 'I'm as normal as any woman. I don't care what any doctor says, it's *your* fault!'

She was standing by a window, the curtains drawn, in the bungalow which was so pleasant and new. This room was long and rather narrow, with its double bed and the wardrobe against one end wall, the dressing-table at the other. The colouring was pink and grey with white background, and a motif of roses was in the carpet, the wallpaper, the bedspread and the curtains; a little fussy, perhaps, and yet undeniably attractive. She wore a flimsy dressing-gown loose at the waist, a tight-fitting, pink nightdress, low at the front. She had the kind of a figure which could drive a man almost crazy with desire, and even as she stood there crying Guy was aware of it and of desire for her. He sat up against the pillow on the left side of the bed, hair as immaculate as it was during the day, troubled, yet by now so used to

his wife's accusation, that it no longer came as a shock, no longer hurt and angered him.

'Bel, darling, they *all* say the same, and—'

'I don't care what they say! It must be you!'

'Bel, sweetheart, there isn't any way of being sure,' he protested very gently. 'We've done everything we can. And Dr. Maddern told us that this is quite common among young couples.'

'It must be you I tell you!' she screamed. The way she drew her lips back, the way she clenched and raised her fists, detracted from her beauty. He had never seen her like this, and for a moment he was silenced. 'All my family have a lot of children, they're all wondering why I'm so long starting a family.'

'Darling, your family doesn't come into this,' Guy interjected.

'Oh yes it does! The Blandings of Middlecombe have lived here for centuries. *Centuries.* And all the daughters have lots of babies. *My* family matters to me even if it doesn't to you.'

'But I didn't say—'

'You said my family doesn't come into this, but it does!' she screamed. 'I've got four sisters and they all had their firstborn within a year. Why, Doris was married nearly two years after me and she's had a son for *three months.* It's your fault, it must be your fault.'

Heavily, miserably, Guy Compton said, 'Well, there's nothing we can do about it even if it *is* my fault.'

'Oh, isn't there,' she cried. 'Isn't there! You can have as much sex as you want, you don't care whether I get what I want. And I want a baby. If you can't give me one then I'll find a man who can.'

Guy caught his breath. 'You wouldn't—'

'Oh, yes, I would! I could divorce you, it's easy these days. And I wouldn't even have to wait for a divorce. If you can't give me a child I'll find a man who can, and you—'

He moved swiftly across to her, and slapped her across the face so hard that she gasped, then backed away, what little colour she had ebbing from her cheeks. He went closer and snatched at her hands, first one and then the other, manoeuvred until he held both slim wrists in his left hand, and with his free hand, slapped her a second time.

'Don't you ever say that to me again!' he rasped. 'Don't ever say that again!'

Half crying, she said, 'I've got every right to say what I like.'

'Oh, have you,' he growled. 'Let me tell you something. You're *mine.* Every part of you is mine. No other man's going to touch you. If one ever does, I'll kill him. Understand? I'll kill him.' Suddenly, he let her go, but before she could move he picked her up bodily and spun around, took her to the bed and dumped her down. As she bounced, he tore at the neck of her nightdress and ripped it open, ripped

it right down the middle, and then flung himself on her.

Later, she whispered hoarsely, ‘That was wonderful, Guy.’

‘Wonderful,’ he echoed. ‘Perfect.’

‘I—I didn’t mean a word I said,’ she breathed.

‘Don’t ever say it again,’ he warned.

‘I—I swear I won’t,’ she promised, then gave a kind of giggle. ‘But if we don’t have a baby after tonight we never will have!’

‘The thing you have to remember is that any babies you have are to be mine,’ Guy growled, and there remained an underlying note of savagery in his voice. She was not only frightened but a little awed. He had never been so masterful, never shown how deeply he felt before.

And she loved him so. She did love being with him so; being possessed.

If only they could have a baby! For she really did feel a sense of shame because the women in her family were so fertile. There hadn’t been a barren Blanding for centuries.

And it must be his fault. Whose else could it be?

Chapter Two

THE DOCTORS

Maddern woke soon after eight o'clock, the telephone bell ringing in his ear. As he hitched himself up and made ready to take it, the ringing sound stopped. He heard a voice not far away; Bertha Witherspoon had intercepted the call. She would come in, if it were an emergency. After a few seconds there was a gentle tap at the door; and soon another. He sat fully upright, and called, 'Come in.'

She came in, carrying his morning tea on a small, wooden tray; on it was an old-fashioned brown teapot, a pink china jug and matching cup and saucer, grouped on a lace tray-cloth.

'So you're awake,' she observed, as if disapproving. 'What time did you get in last night, doctor?'

'Oh, about three,' he answered.

She advanced and placed the tray on his bedside table, pushing the telephone and a notebook aside. She invariably 'advanced', a short, very broad and massive woman with iron-grey hair arranged in a bun at the back.

'You don't get enough sleep,' she said flatly.

'Oh, I make up for it,' he said.

'That's not true and you know it,' asserted Mrs. Witherspoon. She poured out tea, her hands red from scrubbing and the fingers square-topped but the nails a good shape. Everything about her showed strength. Yet she had never had a child, although she had married early and been widowed only three years ago. 'Was the child born well?'

'Yes,' answered Maddern.

'Was it a boy or a girl?'

'A boy,' said Maddern.

'And the last,' she remarked, with a kind of gloomy satisfaction. 'The last child on your list, doctor. Such a thing has never happened anywhere in my experience.'

He sipped tea, while looking very straight at her.

'Who telephoned, Mrs. Witherspoon?'

'It was Dr. Simister,' she answered.

'And what did he want?'

'He asked me to tell you he would be glad if you could see him and one or two others after surgery this morning.'

'Where?' asked Maddern.

'At the hospital, doctor. Where else would it be?'

'I'll fit it in,' he said, resignedly.

Half an hour later, bathed, shaved, feeling surprisingly fresh, he went into the dining-room, it was a pleasant and unassuming room, with its small

refectory table and old leather-slung chairs. The oak beams broke the off-white of the walls, a huge beam spanned the ceiling. The windows, of small leaded lights, made even bright mornings like this seem dark. Coffee was percolating; there was toast in a silver rack and fresh bread by a toaster, while a rich aroma of frying bacon came from the kitchen. He poured coffee as Bertha came in, bacon, eggs and sausages on a tray carried stiff-armed before her. She was quiet this morning; subdued. It wasn't until she had put the tray in front of him that she said, 'It's not natural, doctor.'

He didn't pretend not to understand.

'No,' he agreed. 'It's very strange indeed.' He flashed a bright smile. 'Perhaps the human race is dying out!'

She gave an unexpected, wintry smile as she headed for the door.

'I don't know how you can joke about such things,' she reproved and went out.

Maddern, eating, thought: No, I don't either, and ate on with a curiously determined vigour.

Later, while he talked with and examined the patients who came into his surgery from the waiting-room, he saw all the younger women as under a cloud, barren women, many hating their barrenness. None this morning wanted help to make them fertile, however, and there were no serious ailments; a fretful little woman with headaches, a fat boy with stomach ache, a teenage girl with a big broad face distressed by acne, a rather handsome woman with sinus, a pale and limp boy of eight with anaemia. Such an ailment always reminded him of Lilian, but he gave her hardly a thought this morning.

There was only one child in arms, a three-month old girl, who was not keeping down her mother's milk; nothing else served to remind him of the babe born last night. He reassured the young, red-cheeked, blue-eyed mother, gave her the necessary advice, and then was alone.

It was a quarter to eleven.

The number of people at his surgeries these days was much fewer than nine to twelve months ago. It was surprising how many ailments sprang from pregnancy, or fell to the lot of the newly born. And it was hardly surprising that he was dwelling on that aspect of his work this morning. He went out to his car and found Mrs. Witherspoon, a woman of unbounded energy, cleaning the windscreen.

'I'm going to call on the Gunnisons,' he told her, 'and then on to the hospital.'

The Gunnisons, mother, father and newborn babe, were all doing fine, and he stayed at the cottage only for a few minutes.

Driving along the narrow lane towards the main road, he began to wonder what Simister wanted: which patient they had in common. The Torrent farm stood very sharp against the pale sky, and an old man watched him from the open doorway; the present farmer's father. How many generations of Torrents had been born there? At least six. Soon, he turned into the grounds of the hospital, which was a converted Georgian manor

house, a gift to Middlecombe by the now-gone Golden family.

He checked himself from dwelling on how many Goldens had been born in this house, actually laughed, and then pulled up at a car park, screened by trees growing low to the ground – cypress and wych elm, chestnut and hawthorn. A dozen other cars were parked in this spot which was reserved for the doctors who attended the hospital. This was more than usual at this hour of the morning, and he noticed Sir Gerald Daley's Rolls there; Daley was one of the leading gynaecologists of the West Country and also a Harley Street consultant. He was puzzled by this, as he was puzzled when a man stepped out of the trees almost in his path which led to the side entrance of the hospital.

'Good morning, sir.' The man gave him a searching glance: more than a glance, a scrutiny.

'Good morning.'

Maddern went on, then saw another stranger, standing among the trees, obviously close to the path which led from a car park at the back. Two strange men – Good Lord, *three*! The third was standing on the side porch, looking at a newspaper which he lowered as Maddern stepped on to the porch.

' 'Morning, sir.'

Maddern did no more than grunt, as he went inside. He was agitated, without really knowing why. At least the entrance lobby appeared normal, Jeff Ockley, the head porter, and an ambulance man were talking to the telephonist, who sat at his old-fashioned plug-type hospital exchange, inside an open window office.

'Good morning, doctor—'Morning, sir—Good morning.' He gave a general response, and then out of the corner of his eye saw a man he had never seen before standing by the switchboard. That made four strange men, and he had a feeling they were policemen; that the hospital was being watched.

Nonsense! he decided, and then opened the door of the Common Room. This was the room where all general consultations among local doctors took place; where general practitioners could talk with surgeons and specialists over the general problems of the day; the room, too, in which to relax and smoke and talk generally. Simister would almost certainly be waiting for him here.

The room was crowded. Not only Simister but most of the doctors in the area were present. Sir Gerald Daley sat on the couch with its back against the window overlooking more huge trees. With Daley was a man whom Maddern had never seen in person before, but whom he recognised on sight, because he had appeared often on television and his photograph frequently appeared in the newspapers.

This was a Dr. Palfrey, about whom one fact was beyond doubt: his appearances on these media always coincided with times of national crises.

Maddern was so taken aback that he stood with the door open behind him, staring at Palfrey. Simister, whom he had expected to find in a quiet corner, was actually by the door, which he closed quickly. He was a tall,

dark, rather saturnine-looking man in a pale grey suit. Gripping Maddern's shoulder painfully, he said in a clear, carrying voice, 'Now we're all here, gentlemen.'

He half-pushed Maddern towards a nearby chair. Chairs were arranged in a semi-circle, as they were when unofficial lectures were being given by top men in the profession, or by Ministry of Health or Home Office spokesmen, or lecturers from the South Western Hospital Board. Everyone was ready, presumably everyone had been briefed—except he, Maddern. He felt a rising exasperation. Resisting Simister's pressure, he asked sharply, 'What is all this?'

'Come, Reggie—' began Simister.

'I came for a brief consultation with you and a few others,' Maddern insisted stubbornly. 'That's what I've time for.' He was aware of Palfrey looking at him as if disapprovingly and had no doubt at all of the disapproval of several of his own colleagues. Palfrey's gaze, and a sudden, more vivid awareness of the man's reputation, made him wish that he hadn't forced the issue; but to go meekly to a seat would be abject surrender. With one half of his mind he wished he could crawl to the chair; with the other, he still felt annoyed, if not angry. After all, he *had* been brought here on false pretences.

So, he turned round and stepped towards the door. Someone started to speak but checked himself. Someone else began to move, but also stopped. He opened the door with a jerk – and came face to face with the strange man who had been with the telephone operator. There was no doubt that this man's simple purpose was to stop him from leaving. As he realised that, all the native stubbornness which characterised Maddern – although few people were aware of it – gathered strength.

'Who are you?' he demanded coldly.

'I'm sorry, sir, but I must ask you to stay.'

'Never mind being sorry! Who are you? A policeman?'

'Well, sir, I—'

'If you're a policeman, show me your official card. If you're not, get out of my way.'

There was a long pause. The man in front of him, who had very clear grey eyes, certainly hadn't expected such resistance, and looked quite nonplussed. He made no move to show his card, nor indeed made any attempt to move at all. Someone behind Maddern began to speak, but Maddern went forward, swift and decisive. The man thrust out his right arm, to restrain him. Maddern took the wrist between his thumb and forefinger, gave a barely perceptible flick of his own wrist and sent the other flying back against the passage wall. As if he hardly noticed what he had done, Maddern strode out but had not gone a step before a man spoke from behind him. He sensed, although he could not be sure, that it was Dr. Palfrey.

'Dr. Maddern,' the man said quietly.

Maddern didn't turn round as he responded, 'Yes?'

'Will you tell me where you learned judo?'

Briskly, Maddern turned, and made sure that it was Palfrey. The man of such renown was taller than he had realised, more powerful, and at close quarters, more handsome. He looked tired, but there was another impression, much, much stronger. He knew exactly what he wanted; there was determination of a most unusual kind.

'I learned in London,' Maddern answered, at last. 'At the Medical Association's gymnasium.'

'I hope you will allow me to congratulate you; that was quite a trick.'

'Thank you,' Maddern said, still stiffly.

'And I also hope you will accept my apologies for the rather melodramatic nature of your welcome. It wasn't meant to be so formal. You happened to be the last to arrive, and the others had already been briefed. Everyone was asked to meet Dr. Simister, or Mr. Brody here, in an endeavour not to attract too much attention, or start anybody thinking too much. When they arrived they were asked if they would wait for a few minutes to hear a word or two from me.' Until that moment, Palfrey had spoken earnestly and looked almost solemn, but now his lips curved and his eyes crinkled at the corners. 'Will you spare me a few minutes, too? It is for a very good reason, I assure you.'

With sharp relief, Maddern turned back to the room he had so recently left, saying, 'Yes, of course.' The man whom he had hurled against the wall was standing upright, and looking at him, Maddern, as if with approval. Palfrey walked with Maddern leading him to a chair on one side, not the one towards which Simister had pushed him. As he sat down, Maddern felt a flush of embarrassment at his cheeks, wished heartily that he hadn't made a scene, and slid his right hand aimlessly in his pocket. The man next to him, Henshaw, the ear, nose and throat consultant, was pulling at a smelly pipe.

Sir Gerald Daley made a loud coughing noise, and then stood up. He and Palfrey were facing the twenty-odd doctors and surgeons in the room, and Daley seemed to be looking everywhere but at Maddern.

'Great honour to have Dr. Palfrey with us,' he said. '*Very* great pleasure. Won't take up any of his valuable time. Or yours. Dr. Palfrey.' He grunted again and sat down, surprisingly embarrassed in the great man's presence. To find Daley ill-at-ease was like seeing a bubble burst; Maddern would never again be over-impressed by him at a consultation.

My God! If there *were* any more consultations for a gynaecologist.

Palfrey began to speak, and somehow this added to his stature; to his authority. Whenever he was taking some kind of positive action, he was very impressive indeed; it was as if speech revealed the strength and nature of the man.

'Thank you, Sir Gerald.' He smiled briskly, reaching out to everyone in the room. 'I think I should be very frank with you. First, I can't command it but I would be most grateful if you will treat what I have to say in strict confidence.' There was a round of murmured assurance. 'Thank you, gentlemen. I came here today because of the strange dearth of babies—indeed, of pregnancies—in this part of the world.'

Maddern felt a shock of surprise as Palfrey went on, ‘It is a phenomenon which has been puzzling the authorities in other places for a long time. If you ask me to specify the districts I can only say that various rural areas have been affected; that they are not restricted to Local Authority areas: in short, that this one is quite typical and that the general development of the situation has been much the same everywhere. I’ve been asked by the British Government to get what information I can. You may know that I have a peculiar kind of responsibility. As the chief executive of an international organisation known as Z5, I have to try to keep a finger on the pulse of any phenomena which might threaten mankind on a large or a small scale. And —’ he put his right hand to his forehead and began to twirl a few strands of his fair hair about his forefinger ‘there could be no greater danger than the dying out of the race.’

When he stopped there was a kind of sigh from the listeners, suggesting that the deep significance of what he had said came home belatedly to the assembled doctors. Certainly everyone stared very intently at Palfrey, who slowly and deliberately untwined the strands of hair and patted them back into position.

‘What I am doing here,’ he went on, ‘is exactly what I’ve done in other affected places: attempting to deal with the situation as if it were unique, and we were starting absolutely from scratch. Only in this way can the various affected areas be compared effectively.’ He broke off, and then, obviously deliberately, looked straight at Maddern, and said, ‘I believe you brought the last baby into this part of the world at about two-thirty last night, Dr. Maddern. You know as well as I do, perhaps better, that there isn’t another on the way. You do *not* know that this barrenness is occurring in several widely separated parts of the British Isles. A great deal of time has been lost, but it is no use holding an inquest on the delays. Obviously, the barrenness could be a natural phenomenon, in which case we need desperately to find out what is causing it. As obviously it could be due to some human agency, in which case we need to know just as desperately *who* it is. And—’ He looked round the room slowly until his gaze came to rest again on Maddern, as he added, ‘in either case, I urgently need your help.’

Chapter Three

THE REQUEST

Maddern seemed to be in a world apart.

The other doctors were looking from him to Palfrey and back. Palfrey was watching him intently. Yet he did not fully understand the significance of what Palfrey had said. Oh, he knew the meaning of the words, he understood them literally, but: natural phenomenon? Or due to some human agency? What was he implying?

One of the doctors at the back of the room, Kennedy, an amiable youngish man with several children, broke a tense silence.

'Dr. Palfrey, may I—may I ask—' He broke off, in obvious confusion.

'Ask anything you like,' Palfrey encouraged.

'Are you implying that some—some *people* might be inducing this infertility?'

'Yes, of course,' Palfrey answered simply.

Someone out of Maddern's sight exclaimed, 'My God!'

'Alternatively,' said Simister, 'it could be an inhuman agency.'

'I prefer to say "non-human",' replied Palfrey.

'You—ah—you—ah—you couldn't possibly be implying that this could be a kind of visitation from outer space, could you?' George Plumley hummed and hah'd. He had round, red cheeks and spoke with a very slight impediment, almost as if he had a plum in his mouth. Now, all heads turned towards him, even Maddern's. There was a hint of excitement about Plumley, whose cheeks shone and whose eyes were bright, almost eager. He was known to be a science fiction addict, and to hold the opinion that flying saucers came from some planet in outer space.

'Obviously, it could be,' Palfrey answered.

The man who had exclaimed 'My God' now called out as if in anguish, 'My *God*!' Another man, whose voice Maddern didn't recognise, said in tones of protest, 'Oh, really!'

'Well, it could be a visitation,' interjected plump Mary Dexter, the only woman present.

That remark silenced them all.

There was growing uneasiness among them; in some, clear signs of distress. And as he studied Dr. Palfrey's finely drawn face and went back over the meeting so far, Maddern had a feeling that Palfrey had deliberately created this distress. Nothing he said in his low-pitched, pleasing voice was calculated to soothe.

'The *moon*,' Plumley exclaimed, in a tone of near ecstasy.

'Oh, no,' Mary Dexter exclaimed.

'Ah. Dr. Palfrey. Ah.' Sir Gerald Daley shifted in his chair. He was an impressive, grey-haired man with a clear complexion, a high-bridged nose

and arched lips. ‘You can’t seriously suggest that the moon could possibly have caused this?’

‘Why not?’ demanded Plumley, shrilly.

‘My dear sir. The *moon*—’ Daley stopped in mid-air, so to speak, shook his head and fell silent.

‘I have heard rumours, you know,’ said Rees, ‘to the effect that when the astronauts returned from the moon some moon dust which survived in joints and crevices of the capsule was blown off in the wind as they entered the Earth’s atmosphere. And there can be no saying where it came to Earth, can there?’

‘Dai, you’re as bad as George here,’ protested the man who had said, ‘Oh, really!’

‘I don’t always agree with George as you well know,’ retorted Rees. ‘But we are dealing with a positive, physical manifestation. Man has been to the moon. He has brought back moon dust as well as a wide variety of other mineral samples. There *is* no certainty about the nature and the effect of these samples.’ He paused, in a shocked silence, then went on quite sharply, ‘Is there, Dr. Palfrey?’

‘Some certainty,’ Palfrey answered promptly. ‘Tests have been and are being made on moon dust and moon mineral samples in most of the major research departments and universities in the world.’ His hand strayed to his hair again. ‘You know as well as I do, gentlemen, that some of the results have been released.’

‘What *hasn’t* been released? That’s the key question,’ Rees put in.

‘Yes, indeed. And I don’t know the answer,’ Palfrey replied. ‘I do know that there is no evidence at all that moon dust or any substance from the moon not burnt off when the space craft re-entered the Earth’s atmosphere is known to have had any effect on animal birth anywhere.’

‘You mean, experiments have been made?’ a man demanded from the side of the room.

‘In great depth, yes. On mice, rats, rabbits and monkeys. All the results have been negative. The period from conception to birth has been normal in every way. It was an obvious possibility that there could be a delay or a quickening effect from unknown drugs,’ Palfrey went on. ‘These tests were part of routine tests and had nothing to do with my special enquiry. I simply checked in great detail. There is no evidence at all of moon-caused sterility.’ He patted the ringlet of hair down again, and smiled faintly. ‘As I told you, we have no idea what has caused these areas of sterility, and we must find out.’

‘Didn’t you say that there were several areas?’ Simister asked, from his seat near Daley.

‘Three known areas, yes. One here, one in North Wales and one in the Yorkshire Ridings. The conditions and the type of countryside are much the same, as I’ve told you. Rural—where one would expect more than the average birthrate. Widespread, with a small town such as Middlecombe, a single hospital, a community not absolutely isolated but as near as we have

to isolation in the British Isles these days. There were some reports from farmers of barren periods among livestock, and fertilisers were suspected. As they were from isolated areas, not a lot of attention was paid, and most research was abortive. There was similar delay in recognising the situation where human births were concerned. General practitioners inevitably noticed it first and reported—as you know. Some put it down to over-use of contraceptives, which are becoming much more freely available. Then farmers sent in reports.'

'Damn it, not *every* woman would use them even if she could,' interpolated a big, powerful-looking man, Smith, the local gynaecologist and obstetrician. He played rugby for the Western Counties and was perhaps the most beloved doctor in the area. 'Why, I know dozens—*hundreds*—who believe they're the Devil's spawn. Not all are R.C.s by any means, either. I could name half a dozen men who'd rather do without fun and games for months than allow their wives to use the pill. No one in his senses can blame this load of barren women on the *pill.* It's madness.'

Trust Bob Smith to bring common sense into the discussion, Maddern thought. He himself felt much better now, perhaps a little disappointed in Palfrey, who had lost that impressiveness and become almost meek and tentative.

'Nicely put,' he approved. 'The key words are "no one in his senses".' While they waited for him to go on, he smiled, diffidently. 'Not everyone is in his senses, especially about the pill. I've known men of sound common sense and high intelligence get hysterical, both for and against it. Now!' He squared his shoulders, and there was a change in him, a return of decisiveness. 'Some questions, please. Has *anyone* present any theory as to the cause of the barrenness?' He looked from man to man. *'Anyone!'* Then in a tone almost of exasperation, he went on, 'No one with a single idea. Tell me, gentlemen, how many of you have realised the possible significance of this phenomenon?' When there was no reply, he continued. 'Do you realise, for instance, how far it could spread?'

Maddern spoke, very quietly.

'If it's infectious or contagious, eventually nationwide. But on the face of it it can't be infectious or contagious.'

'Why not?' demanded Simister, who looked antagonistic.

'The phenomenon apparently doesn't apply to neighbouring rural districts,' answered Maddern. 'People intermingle a great deal on some of the border areas. If it were contagious or infectious this incidence would not be confined virtually to the Middlecombe Rural boundaries. It would spread in a wider and wider circle. And people who move from the area would be affected, causing many more than three affected places.' He said all this quite objectively, thinking only slightly ahead of his words, and as he finished he turned to Palfrey. 'Is this restriction true of the other two childless districts, sir?'

'Yes,' answered Palfrey. 'The area affected seems to be one of the terrain rather than of population.'

‘Then the indications are that it is not infectious or contagious,’ Maddern said. ‘It—’

That was the moment when he broke off. A thought of such horror struck him that for a moment he felt sick. With the nausea came a moment of dizziness, and Palfrey’s face seemed to shimmer and shake and Palfrey’s eyes grow huge. All of this was over in a flash, and he steadied, but his train of thought was broken. He hoped Palfrey would not ask him to take the question further.

He sat down.

Another man was speaking and a dozen others spoke, obviously simply for the sake of talking to Palfrey. At last, the voices stopped and Palfrey said very clearly, ‘Thank you all very much, gentlemen. What we need is the closest possible description of all the pregnancies you have coped with in the past year, particularly of pregnancies which may have been terminated early. We need, in fact, a detailed analysis of the health of women of child-bearing age, so that we can check if there are any similarities or any factors which might help us.’

Simister spoke, almost sarcastically.

‘But these are women who’ve had their children. We want to know what women have been up to to prevent conception. After all, we may—’

He broke off abruptly as Maddern had, and sat down. Suddenly, everyone was on the move; as suddenly, a man appeared at the doorway carrying a sheaf of folders, handing one to each doctor. Maddern took one, almost mechanically, and tucked it underneath his arm. As he went out, Dai Rees caught up with him.

‘It’s a remarkable business, isn’t it?’ Rees remarked.

‘Astonishing.’

‘But I can’t understand why *Palfrey* should come here, can you?’

‘Eh?’

‘I can’t see why Palfrey came down here. He’s normally involved in international affairs, and—’ Rees broke off, as if astounded. ‘Good God!’

‘Good God it is,’ agreed Maddern, soberly.

“They’re afraid it could have international repercussions!’

‘Could be,’ conceded Maddern.

‘I wonder what the hell *is* going on?’ said Rees, helplessly. They walked through the little copse towards their parked car, some cars moved off. A stink of petrol exhaust fouled the air, and Rees waved his hand in front of his cars. Several engines were already turning, car doors were slamming, his face grimaced. ‘Damned stink,’ he complained. ‘You’d think that they could at least take the stench out of petrol fumes, wouldn’t you, even if they can’t stop us from being poisoned. Oh, well!’ His car was near Maddern’s. ‘Must be off, I suppose. Don’t seem to have much more leisure, even though we haven’t any anxious mothers to look after.’ He climbed into his car, and called across, ‘I forgot—you still have a mother and child, haven’t you?’

Rees roared with laughter, and drove off, the blue fumes from his exhaust billowing about Maddern’s car with an unpleasant stench.

Maddern went off on his rounds, visiting the old and the young, the slightly sick and the dangerously ill, the convalescent and the nigh unto death. Everything was normal, except that there were so few mothers and infants-in-arms. He finished his calls a little before one o'clock and felt a strange sense of anticlimax. Rees was wrong in one way: there was considerably less work, and so more leisure, if one chose to use it. Until early evening surgery he had nothing to do, unless he made a few calls ahead of time, or there were some urgent messages at home.

He preferred to be busy.

How busy he had been when Lilian had been alive! How seldom he had had a free afternoon, and how excited he had been whenever he had been able to get home for an hour before evening surgery. He pulled into the creeper-covered garage at the side of the cottage and let himself in. There was no sign of Bertha, but several messages were in the wooden bowl on the chiffonier.

Would he telephone Mrs. Duyman? She'd had an attack. That assumed a heart attack, of course, and was a normal call from a neurotic woman. There wasn't much the matter with her body, only with her mind. Would he call and see Josiah Davenport, an old man who often wanted no more than a chat and deserved it. And finally: would he please wait at home until Dr. Palfrey had called to see him—about two thirty.

'What on Earth does he want with me?' Maddern said aloud. The message brought back to mind everything that had happened and been said at that meeting, and he shrank from much of it.

He had a cold lunch, left out by Bertha who always went to her sister on Monday afternoon, stacked the dirty crockery on the draining board and as he looked out of the leaded window saw a girl in the garden among the apple and pear trees. She was young and very slender, and for a moment he wasn't quite sure it was a girl. Then she turned round, and he saw her sideways on so that there was no doubt.

She was looking upwards.

Puzzled, he stood watching. The fruit was plentiful but wasn't ripe enough for eating, and in any case why should a girl pick apples in the middle of the afternoon? He was even more puzzled when she darted a quick glance towards the house, as if fearful of being seen. He was hidden by a curtain, and apparently she did not see him.

Next moment she leapt upwards, arms outstretched, gripped the bough of a tree and hauled herself out of sight. It was done with such speed and grace that it was almost possible to suspect he had dreamed it. But that had been no dream! He moved away from the window, cautiously, then went upstairs to the room immediately above this: the spare bedroom. It had a clear view of the orchard, particularly of the tree where she had disappeared. He squeezed between an old four-poster bed and the window, peered out, and saw the girl, sitting cross-legged on a thick branch, her back against the trunk. He himself had lopped two adjoining branches in the autumn, that was why she had so much room.

He went downstairs and into the kitchen, then out and towards the garden shed, and as he neared the shed, he saw a man; one of those who had been among the trees at the hospital. The man ducked out of sight and did not reappear. Maddern felt a creepy feeling running up and down his spine and gritted his teeth.

Was he one of Palfrey's men?

If so, why was he watching this house?

And did the girl work for Palfrey, too?

Maddern went into the toolshed, selected a pair of secateurs and strolled into the garden. Between shed and orchard was a little rose bed, and a lot of the old, dying bloom wanted taking off, while there were a few scarlet roses. Old Josiah loved red roses.

As he clipped and snipped, Maddern looked about him. As far as he could judge there was no one else in the garden; and if he hadn't seen the other two he would never have suspected that anyone was here. It was pleasantly warm. Tall beech trees and spreading chestnut trees from parkland adjoining the house sheltered him from the hot sun. He did not search, but once or twice looked up. There was the girl, legs drawn up, body pressed very tightly against the trunk, as if she were scared.

Then, Maddern saw a remarkable thing.

She took her hand from her pocket, and he caught a glimpse of a small pistol. She levelled it, and his heart began to thump, but she was levelling it at someone at least five yards to his right. He turned his head, very cautiously, and saw the man who had ducked out of sight.

If he, Maddern, was any judge, the girl was waiting until the man drew within range; and the moment he was, she would shoot.

Chapter Four

A MATTER OF URGENCY

A cry hovered in Maddern's throat, and the sound would not come. He stood in cold stillness. The girl sat in ambush and the man drew within a dangerously close range. Then, as Maddern broke the tension and began to shout a warning, a man he had not seen before appeared beneath the tree, behind the girl, and spoke in the most casual of voices.

'That's enough, Susie. Down you come.'

He stepped beneath the girl and held his arms upwards and outwards, as if to catch her when she jumped. Instead of jumping, she stood up and stretched out for a higher branch, then with a dazzlingly swift movement pointed the gun towards the man and fired. There was a bark of sound. The man dodged to one side, just in time. The girl then dropped until she swung on the branch where she had been crouching, kicking out at the first man who was now close to the tree.

'Watch her,' the other called. 'Little vixen!'

'That's enough, Sue,' the other reproved. 'Drop that pistol and—'

Instead, she let one hand go, levelled the gun, and fired again. The speaker swayed to one side. The girl dropped to the grass, and straightened up, light as a bird. Then she began to race towards the house, her beautiful fair hair streaming back from her head.

There was only one expression on her face: *terror*.

It showed in her eyes, in the way her lips were turned back, in the way her hands were clenched. *Terror.* She did not look behind her and did not seem to know that Maddern was there. Both men spun round and began to follow, but she had ten or twelve yards start, and she ran like the wind.

'Stop her!' one man called.

It was too late, even had Maddern been inclined. She was past him in a flash, and the men, running as fast as they were able, seemed lumbering by comparison. The second one, indeed, lost his balance and pitched into Maddern's precious roses. He gasped, as thorns clawed at him. Maddern, torn between fear for the girl and alarm for his roses, was still rooted to the ground. He could not decide whether he wanted the girl to get away, or whether he wanted to quieten her. In his mind's eye he could still see the terror on her face.

Suddenly, she crumpled up. He did not know what she had fallen over, but it was something in the grass. The man closed on her softly, but before he could reach her she sprang to her feet again.

He grabbed her.

She struck at him savagely, kicked and kneed him; she was a maelstrom of violence and he fought desperately to control her. There was froth at her lips, and her teeth showed, she even tried to bite. As Maddern drew up,

knowing she must be quietened, he could hear the rasping of her breath down her throat. Soon, she would surely collapse.

And she did so on the very instant the thought entered his head. The man saved her from falling but only took her weight against his body. He himself was gasping for breath, and blood began to ooze from a long scratch on his cheek.

Maddern said, 'I'll take her.' He stood behind the girl named Sue or Susie, and turned her round, then hoisted her over his left shoulder with surprisingly little effort. A bee settled on her hair. He carried her towards the back of Hallows End through the kitchen to the surgery, laid her on the examination couch, then turned to the cabinet where he kept his drugs. He had a hypodermic already loaded, for emergency use, with morphine. He unlocked this and took out the syringe, as the man who had caught her came in.

'What are you giving her?' he asked.

'Ephregen,' answered Maddern shortly.

'How long will it put her out?'

Maddern did not answer but unstopped a bottle of alcohol, dipped in a swab, pushed up a loose-fitting sleeve and then cleaned a spot on the girl's arm. Next, he picked up the syringe and held the needle under some sterilised water in a steaming pan.

The man's hand touched his wrist, a lean, strong, browned hand.

'How long?' he repeated.

'Long enough for me to call the police and charge you with assault.'

'This isn't a game, Dr. Maddern. How *long*?'

Maddern was seething with anger. There was something at the back of his mind which told him these men were only doing their job, but that did not still his fury. They seemed to act as if they were a law unto themselves and talked with an arrogance he would take from no man, and while the girl had been the assailant, they had dealt with her as if she were a puppet; made of plastic rather than flesh and blood.

How *dare* they behave like this anywhere; more particularly, how *dare* they in his house?

The brown fingers tightened round his wrist, as if to make sure Maddern could not thrust the needle into the girl's arm. He stared at Maddern, accusingly. Maddern, almost choking with anger, let his arm go slack, and then with the other's grip easing, he pulled himself free and jabbed the needle into the lower part of the man's forearm.

The man caught his breath. Maddern jammed the plunger home and then withdrew the needle.

'You'll soon find out how long,' he said harshly.

The man stared at him in utter disbelief. His colleague, just behind him, called out, 'What's going on?' The man whom Maddern had jabbed tried to speak, but suddenly crumpled up. Maddern, syringe in hand, found himself looking into the gap where he had been; and into the face of the other, who was at one side.

Maddern growled, ‘This girl needs sedation, her pulse is far too high and she was hysterical before she flopped out. I am going to give her an injection of Ephregen. Don’t try to stop me.’

He recognised the man whom he had thrown with judo that morning, lean-faced, with glittering grey eyes. Maddern himself, looked angry, dangerous. He was quivering all over, suffering from a kind of shock.

The sleeve had fallen over the girl’s arm, and he pushed it up, noticing how light it was; more like a skin than a fabric. He cleaned the spot again, plunged the needle into the ampoule and drew half of the contents into the syringe. The moment he turned towards the girl, he expected the man to stop him.

Instead, the other asked, ‘Is that what you gave Childers?’

‘Who?’

‘My colleague.’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Because he tried to prevent me from giving this girl an injection.’ With his left hand Maddern pinched the flesh above the spot he had cleansed and plunged in the needle. The girl showed no sign of feeling or awareness. He pulled the sleeve down and then drew a blanket up from the foot of the couch. ‘She can stay there until my housekeeper comes,’ he stated with a clear finality and turned to face the second man.

He was surprised by a faint smile at the other’s eyes.

‘You make up your mind what you want to do and go ahead and do it, don’t you?’

‘If I think it’s the right thing,’ Maddern replied flatly.

‘How long will Childers be out?’

‘Five or six hours, I should imagine.’

‘My goodness! Dr. Palfrey *will* be pleased!’

‘Do you work for Dr. Palfrey?’ remarked Maddern.

‘In a way. Yes.’

‘Surely you either do or you don’t.’

‘I have been assigned to help and protect him,’ the other answered. ‘I’m Special Branch, C.I.D.’ He drew a card from his ticket pocket and handed it to Maddern, who read:

James Arthur Smith
Criminal Investigation Department,
New Scotland Yard, S.W. 1.
(Special Branch)

Maddern lowered the card.

‘May I keep this?’

‘As a souvenir, yes. Did you realise that you had given knock-out drops to a policeman?’

‘I do now. And I would again in the same circumstances.’

The other's eyes positively glowed.

'I'd better watch out!' He glanced at the girl and went on in a wondering tone, 'She really is a little beauty, isn't she?'

Maddern thought, yes. He looked at her again, and marvelled at the perfection of her features, so small and gentle-seeming, pale cheeks swept by lashes a little darker than the fairness of her hair. Her clothes were of some shiny material, sheathlike on her provocative figure. She was breathing now, easily and softly, completely relaxed.

In a very gentle voice, he asked, 'Who is she?'

'Susan We-don't-know-who,' answered Smith.

'Why should she attack your colleague?'

'I'm sure Palfrey will tell you all he wants you to know,' interrupted Smith. 'He's coming here at half past two, and it's two fifteen now. Should we stay in here, or can we leave our Sue?'

Maddern led the way out of the surgery across the hall and into a long, narrow room with an inglenook fireplace and massive oak beams.

'I'll let him in when he comes,' he said pointedly.

Smith laughed.

'I can take a hint!' He moved towards the door, and then went on, 'I'll be outside with several others, but first, with your permission, I'll search the house. May I?'

'I'm damned if you may!'

'I do have a search warrant,' said Smith mildly. 'But it would be much nicer if you didn't make me use it.'

'Why on Earth do you want to search my house?'

'Because Dr. Palfrey is coming here,' answered Smith simply. 'And my colleagues and I are Dr. Palfrey's bodyguards. He is living under constant threat of assassination, you see. Sue was going to try to kill him. Other young women have tried, and I would hate one of Sue's little friends to be lurking upstairs ready to shoot the great Palfrey. Wouldn't you?'

Heavily, Maddern said, 'I hope Palfrey will make sense out of this nonsense for me. Do whatever you like.'

'Thanks,' said Smith warmly, and stepped into the hall.

Suddenly, Maddern thought: But why should I trust him? He strode out, said, 'I'll come with you,' pushed past Smith and led the way. He opened every cupboard, every wardrobe, every place where a man or even a child could possibly hide and then went upstairs. Everywhere the brasses and the copper shone and the woodwork had the soft glow of centuries of polishing, while there was no dust, no place which needed cleaning.

'Beautiful place,' Smith remarked. 'A real gem.'

'Thank you.'

'I'll leave you in peace now,' Smith went on with that faint smile. 'You have a whole five minutes on your own!'

He went downstairs and let himself out by the front door. Maddern bent down and looked out of a tiny window into the front garden. Only a few fading pink blooms were left on the ramblers, but the dahlias, in small

round beds, were at their best. On one side was a shrubbery, and from this height he saw the heads of two men, lurking.

Neither was Smith.

He straightened up and went downstairs, frowning. So many things had happened that it was difficult to see them all in the right perspective. He did what he always did when he could not make up his mind about the diagnosis of a patient: he dropped the secondary things out of his mind and considered the major ones.

Two stood far out above the others: first, the barrenness of women in three different areas of Great Britain, and second, the threat against Palfrey's life.

It didn't take a genius to realise that Palfrey was in danger because he was investigating the fertility phenomenon, nor to realise that he knew much more than he had yet admitted. Maddern sat back in a winged armchair and delved with his mind for what he knew of Palfrey. He had a particularly retentive mind, especially about things and people who particularly interested him, and Palfrey had always been one of these.

That was hardly surprising.

The world they lived in, Maddern thought sourly, was a strange one; in fact for several generations past mankind had lived in a state of crisis. War among nations, civil wars, threats from nuclear weapons, threats from bacteriological warfare, famine and natural pestilence and—in the opinion of many people, the most serious—the population explosion, threatened life on Earth. These threats were often made by individuals or groups of individuals who had acquired some single weapon with which they could attack the world.

If one looked back over the newspapers of the past ten years, stories of such threats had been legion. And in these stories the name of Dr. 'Sap' Palfrey—what were his Christian names? Maddern paused in his thoughts, making his mind almost a vacuum until the answer filled the vacuum. Ah: Stanislaus Alexander Palfrey, or Sap for short. Every kind of absurd joke and pun had been made around that nickname. *Never mind the trivia*, Maddern rebuked himself. Palfrey was due to arrive at any moment.

What time *was* it?

He glanced at his wristwatch, saw that it was three minutes after two thirty and reflected that three minutes was hardly late. *Back to Palfrey.* There had been a great variety of such threats, from megalomaniacs who saw the world as theirs, to idealists who believed only they could guide mankind to happiness. And Palfrey had been the one who organised the resistance to such threats. He had this organisation called Z5, a kind of supra-national espionage department which served not one country nor any group of countries but the world. Suddenly, Maddern had a mental picture of Palfrey on television at the end of a particularly frightening crisis. He had said, in that quiet, matter-of-fact voice, 'Every nation, without exception, contributes funds to Z5. Every nation, not just one, demands and receives our loyalty. Every nation helps when help is needed. There are so many

dangers today, dangers which can confront one, or many, or all, nations at the same time. The task of my organisation is to co-ordinate all defences against such dangers. Nation may fight nation, and although I may deplore and, as an individual, condemn, my task is not to interfere or to help in such conflicts. To do either would be to lessen each nation's confidence in Z5. My task—our task—is to protect all nations and so all humankind against threats which may come from all corners of the globe—'

Palfrey had paused.

Maddern, astonished by the vividness with which he remembered these words, as accurately as if he had learned them off by heart and repeated them time after time, was held by the steadiness of those eyes, and marvelled that even for a moment he had thought there was weakness in this man.

Then Palfrey had added, very quietly, '—and from all corners of the globe and beyond. For this is the space age and we face dangers far greater than our forefathers conceived. Yet I believe that the weapons with which we can fight such dangers are the old-fashioned ones of truth, honesty, integrity and courage.'

His voice had fallen silent. The picture of his face had faded, and the screen went blank.

There wasn't a screen, Maddern reminded himself almost savagely. That had been recollected vision, held fast in his mind for months, perhaps years. He shook himself. He felt almost as if he had been asleep; dreaming. Suddenly, he was alarmed. What time was it? How late *was* Palfrey? It was nearly a quarter to three, and a quarter of an hour *was* late.

As he stepped towards the passage there was a clanging of a bell from the old-fashioned bell-pull at the side of the front door. He hurried forward, eager and anxious at the same time.

This must be Palfrey, unless something had happened to the man of such renown.

Maddern opened the door, and Palfrey stood there.

Chapter Five

REQUEST

Maddern marvelled yet again that he had not realised how big a man Palfrey was, especially noticeable as he stood framed against the low doorway with its centuries-old beams.

'Hallo,' said Palfrey. 'Nice of you to wait.'

'Your men would have kept me in, wouldn't they?'

'I trust not,' said Palfrey, with a wry smile. 'Although I confess these particular men are certainly behaving in a somewhat arbitrary way.' He had to stoop because the ceiling was so low, and he looked apologetic. 'You may not believe it but they are frightened about the future of man.'

'Aren't we all? Do come in,' went on Maddern. 'Will you have some coffee? Tea? Anything?'

'I'd love a cup of tea,' said Palfrey. 'And are you fairly free for time this afternoon?'

'Yes.'

'Then a cup of tea and some aspirins—I've picked up a very nasty headache.' He put his hand to his head and winced. 'In fact, I did pretty badly on my way here.'

Maddern was suddenly, firmly, a doctor again.

'Let me have a look,' he ordered, and as Palfrey obediently bent his head, his pale fingers probed. 'Hmm—you've a nasty graze. Did someone hurl a brick at you?'

'No. I thought I saw Sue, and dodged—and fell on to a rockery stone.'

'Oh. Tell me if this hurts—Ah. Sorry—Nothing serious but you ought to have it washed and cleaned. I'll do it in my surgery while the kettle's boiling for tea.' He led the way out and Palfrey followed, quite meekly. In fact the first sign Palfrey showed of any resistance was when he saw the man on the couch.

'Good Lord!' he exclaimed. 'Childers as well as the girl! Your work?'

'Yes. I got mad.'

Palfrey gave a snort of a laugh, but the laugh was cut short by a wince; it did his head no good at all.

'Like you got mad with Smithy this morning?' he asked.

'If the man at the door was Smithy, yes. Sit down,' Maddern ordered. 'I can boil the kettle here—' He was at a sink, filling the kettle.

'How often do you get as mad as that?' Palfrey asked.

Maddern plugged the kettle in, and turned to Palfrey, whose back was to the porcelain sink and who was looking at an anatomical chart fastened to the wall, over the couch. He parted Palfrey's hair again, grunted, and then draped a towel over shoulders which, although they sloped, were very wide indeed. Maddern picked up a wad of gauze and held it under the tap. Before

he answered, water dripped on to the back of Palfrey's neck.

'Not often.'

'How often?'

'Occasionally, I suppose, if it matters.'

'Say once a month?'

'Oh, nothing like as often as that! Two or three times a year—hold tight, I'm going to sponge that bump—Nothing like as often as I used to in fact—Hmm—More blood and dirt than damage, I think.'

'Good,' said Palfrey, feelingly. 'So you used to get mad much more often. Why?'

It was really none of his business, Maddern thought, but the conversation had led to this subject quite naturally. It crossed his mind that Palfrey was using his headache and his bumped cranium as an excuse to sound a little ingenuous and to get information without appearing too inquisitive. Did that matter? Maddern had been angry a dozen times today, but now he felt comparatively at peace. Certainly there was no point in picking a quarrel with this man, who had enough to worry about already. And in any case he had recalled Lilian more often, today, than for a long time past.

He said simply, 'My wife died, ten years ago.'

'What angered you?' asked Palfrey, gently.

'Losing her.' Maddern was very busy, using a diluted antiseptic on the raw patch then parting the fair silky hair to look for other bruises. There was only the one, but there was much more grey hair than there had seemed to be from a distance or even standing by him.

'Losing her,' Palfrey echoed.

Maddern said gruffly, 'I suppose the truth is that I was so angry because there was nothing I could do. Nothing anyone could do. It was leukaemia. My God!' A stirring of anger came again. 'Here we spend tens, *hundreds* of millions of pounds on researching into weapons, or into industry, but when it comes to research for medicines no government really takes any trouble or spends more than pin money. It made me mad then and it makes me mad whenever I think of it. And in any case—' Maddern's voice changed and grew stronger. He picked up a tin of antiseptic spray and hissed it over the patch in Palfrey's head. 'Be careful how you comb your hair today then you'll be all right.' He turned round to the kettle, which was on the boil. 'In any case,' he repeated, 'I am by nature a cantankerous and rebellious individual except where my work is concerned. I hate being pushed about by anyone, whether they are policemen, secret service agents, or what.' He was making the tea. 'I hope you don't mind tea bags.'

'I shall judge by the taste,' replied Palfrey.

Maddern found himself laughing.

'Here are a couple of Phenotabs,' he said. 'They'll act quicker than aspirins. If you'll sit back for ten minutes, I'll come and join you.'

'Thank you,' Palfrey murmured.

Maddern led him into the big room, and started out as Palfrey put his legs up on a pouffe. He went back to the surgery and tidied up, then put a pillow

under the girl's head. Doing so, he turned her head towards the window and light shone on her lovely face; a face of delicate colours and a rare beauty. She looked like a doll. *Nonsense.* She looked like a beautiful woman; but a miniature woman. He checked her pulse; it was steady and slow now, as he would expect.

And she had tried to kill Palfrey's man.

His ten minutes were nearly up when the telephone bell rang, and he answered it at once.

'Dr. Maddern.'

A man said, softly, 'Dr. Maddern, you have a young woman in your house.'

'That's right!' said Maddern.

'She is known as Sue or Susan,' the man answered.

'*What* name?' Maddern demanded, more to gain time to think than because he hadn't heard.

'She is a Sue or Susan,' the man repeated in his curiously soft, persuasive voice. 'And Dr. Palfrey is with you, also.'

'Supposing he is.' Maddern began to feel angry.

'Do not allow Palfrey to talk to Susan,' the speaker ordered. It was a threat or a warning, in spite of the quiet voice and precise words. 'Do you understand that? She is not to talk to Dr. Palfrey, nor is she to go away with him. That is most important.'

He held on for a few moments, and his breathing sounded over the wire; it was almost as if he were having difficulty in drawing breath. Then there came the sound of the receiver being hung up, very gently, and the line went dead. At first, Maddern hardly realised that, he was so incensed. And just when he had thought he was calmer! How *dare* any man order him about? My God, if the caller were here. . .

Maddern put the receiver down slowly and stood rigid for a few moments, until anger subsided. Then he went out by the front door and stood watching the idyllic scene: the last roses, fading, but still lovely. The leaves of trees already touched with the yellows and browns of autumn promise. It was a perfect day, the tall trees in the casde grounds, beech, elm and birch massed against the sky. As he watched, he heard the sharp tap, tap, of a woodpecker's beak.

At last, Maddern turned, closed the door, and went in to Palfrey. Palfrey lay comfortably, at full length. His head moved but he did not stir until Maddern stepped in front of him. His eyes were open but drowsy with sleep.

'Hallo,' he murmured. 'I must have dropped off.'

'Do you good,' said Maddern. 'How much rest do you get?'

'Not enough, doctor!' Palfrey sat up cautiously then turned his head experimentally in each direction. His face brightened. 'My head's clearer,' he said, with relief. 'You are a worker of miracles. Thank you.' Now he sat upright as Maddern leaned against a seventeenth-century oak coffer on which stood a well-polished copper kettle. 'How are you?'

'I had a telephone call from a stranger just now warning me not to allow

you to question the girl, Sue or Susan, or to take her away,' Maddern told him. 'And I didn't like it much.'

'No,' said Palfrey. 'You wouldn't.'

'Palfrey.' Maddern's voice became sharp. 'I want to know more about this affair. I'm personally involved, now. I want to know what I'm involved in.'

'Yes,' Palfrey said, in the same tone as he had just said,

'No.' He shifted his position and went on, 'I'll tell you soon. But first, how mad *do* you get?'

'What has that to do with it?' Maddern asked roughly.

'A great deal. You could be an enormous help to me, but any man who can't control his temper would be less help than hindrance. Quite recently I was involved in a case when a man who had lived a lonely life after a happy marriage helped me. *He* was extremely able and efficient. But then, he got angry rather than mad.'

'I can control myself,' Maddern retorted, stiffly. 'I'm not at all sure I want to help you. I shouldn't worry about that too soon.'

Palfrey smiled, very gently.

'You'll want to help,' he said, and stretched out a hand as if in supplication. 'No, don't take umbrage at everything I say. We'll never get anywhere if you do.'

Maddern snapped, 'We won't get anywhere if you don't come to the point.'

It was far too ill-mannered, of course. He was venting his anger on Palfrey who had perhaps done the least to deserve it. He didn't fully understand himself, and yet in a way he was not surprised. He felt irritated much of the time but usually kept his moods to himself. He would feel like flaring up at a patient or a nurse, or at Mrs. Witherspoon, but usually retained enough control to suppress the impulse. Since he had met this Palfrey, he had not been able to keep so tight a hold on himself. He needed no telling that helping the delivery of the last child to be born in Middlecombe had upset him badly, and the visit of Palfrey and the Special Branch police had further disturbed him.

Palfrey, expressionless, said, 'No, it won't. The point is that there are three areas of Great Britain where the population rate has come to a stop, and all animal life including human appears in danger. It's possible that there are other areas of the world where the same thing is true, including regions from which we might normally never hear. In other places it would be regarded as a happy natural phenomenon and not cause alarm. All *I* know is that we don't yet know the explanation and we have to find it. Didn't you have a flash idea at the hospital this morning?'

'Yes,' Maddern admitted.

'What was it?'

'The possibility that someone is using this area as an experimental one for controlling population.'

'Ah,' breathed Palfrey. 'Ah. That's my fear, too.'

'Why the devil don't you find out?'

‘I only started trying to a week ago,’ said Palfrey.

Maddern hitched himself up on the coffer, heavily.

‘What took you so long?’

‘That’s another good question, although you’ve already had the answer. Reports didn’t reach a high enough authority earlier.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ Maddern retorted flatly.

‘Nevertheless, it’s perfectly true. When did *you* first begin to worry?’

‘Oh, months ago.’

‘Months? Nine, eight, seven, six—’ Palfrey broke off. Now his face had a hawk-like look as if he had been touched with anger, too.

‘About five, I suppose.’

‘What took *you* so long?’

‘We’ve had long periods during which there has been a big drop in the birthrate before,’ Maddern answered. ‘This isn’t a heavily populated area. I put it down to the over-use of the pill, which came late here, and the fact that a large proportion of our young people go to the big cities and some women attend the visiting clinics. It really wasn’t more than three months ago that I began to worry.’

‘And when you began to worry, what did you do?’ asked Palfrey.

‘Talked to some of my colleagues.’

‘Were they worried, too?’

‘Some of them were, but no one saw anything sinister in it—just peculiar.’

‘Ah. How long was it before you *all* began to worry?’

‘I suppose, two months,’ said Maddern.

Oddly, this sharp form of interrogation close to a cross- examination did not worry him. He saw what Palfrey was getting at and understood why the other man, in turn, should feel angry. This time Palfrey paused for a few moments before going on, ‘And what did you do then?’

‘We called a meeting—oh, I know, I know,’ Maddern went on, slipping off the coffer and beginning to pace the room. He chose to walk where the oak beams were at their highest, so hardly had to bend his head. ‘It wasn’t until two months ago that we sent a report to the Western branch of the Hospital Board and to the General Medical Council. We dallied. Didn’t want to face up to the facts of the situation. Did the doctors in the other areas do the same?’

‘Yes,’ answered Palfrey.

‘And now you get blamed for delay!’ Maddern stood straight in front of Palfrey, and went on with real feeling, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Palfrey said. ‘It’s just not important now.’

‘But it’s true.’

‘Yes, it’s true,’ said Palfrey. ‘The local doctors dithered and the medical and hospital boards procrastinated, so it’s only a matter of ten days since we had any information at all. We had unofficial reports that something odd was happening. I went to the place in Wales first. *Their* last newborn was born eight days ago.’

‘Good God!’ exclaimed Maddern.

‘And when I began to enquire I ran into trouble,’ went on Palfrey.

‘Such as broken heads?’

‘Not exactly,’ Palfrey answered slowly. ‘There is some kind of invisible force—please don’t laugh—which exerts pressure at awkward times. I was once pushed over a cliff when no one at all was in sight. Another time I was pushed in front of a moving car. I don’t yet know the nature of this force but I think I know its significance,’ Palfrey added.

‘You were recognised, and someone didn’t want you to investigate,’ remarked Maddern. ‘I—ah—I thought Z5 was a very large international organisation. I didn’t think you took an active part in the sense of being a leg-man, or—’ Maddern broke off. ‘Sorry. I don’t mean to be insulting. But *isn’t* this all rather odd?’

‘Very,’ agreed Palfrey. ‘Although the picture of me sitting in an electronically controlled operations room in London and keeping in touch by remote control isn’t exactly a true picture, either. I came here myself because four Z5 agents who were sent here a week ago all died in a car which went out of control. The driver was so expert that loss of control must have been induced; perhaps by this unidentified force. The point is, there comes a time when you can’t let other men die for you. I’m here in person because I hope to draw the murderer’s fire—or the force itself. I know one thing,’ Palfrey went on, in a cold voice. ‘A young woman, much like the Sue you know and dressed in the same way, was near the scene every time.’

It was on the tip of Maddern’s tongue to say ‘I don’t believe it,’ but he checked himself. They stayed as they were, Maddern standing, Palfrey looking up at him. Maddern was seeing Sue’s lovely elfin face in his mind’s eye.

Chapter Six

THE SEARCH

Palfrey looked up into the other man's face, and studied it feature by feature. Maddern was a surprise in many ways, not least in his appearance. He was too plump and too pale but had fine brown eyes and a well-shaped mouth even if his chin did recede so much that it was lost in the fleshy jowl. The way he had acted at the hospital and the way he had behaved here showed him unmistakably for a man of rare decisiveness and exceptional skill. He undoubtedly had a chip on his shoulder, and he was unhappy chiefly because he was lonely.

He, Palfrey, understood loneliness only too well.

What Palfrey most liked about Maddern was his quickness of mind, coupled with his shrewdness. He reached most conclusions much faster than most men, seemed capable of seeing through all the incidental trivia to the heart of a problem or a situation.

He asked, 'Had you seen Susan before?'

'I saw her in my garden, climbing an apple tree, for the first time,' Maddern answered.

'Have you ever caught sight of her before that?'

'I don't understand you.'

'Have you caught a passing glimpse of her in Middlecombe, for instance?'

'No,' answered Maddern flatly. 'What are you wondering about? Whether she's been here for some time or whether she came because you were here?'

'Yes.'

'It looks as if she came just for you or your men,' said Maddern. 'Are you sure she was involved in the death of your agents?'

'Yes.'

'How *can* you be?' demanded Maddern, sceptically.

'She's very lovely, isn't she,' said Palfrey. 'It's hard to believe that anyone like her could hate and kill. Isn't that in your mind?'

'She is sick,' Maddern stated, simply.

'I think you're right. But that doesn't make her any the less dangerous.'

'Oh, no,' agreed Maddern. 'I saw her shoot at the men in the garden. She is murderously inclined all right, and from the way she behaved I would say she is full of hate. And there's hysteria with it, and I suspect she's psychopathic. Sick, as I say. She needs to have treatment and she needs to be kept under observation. However, that doesn't answer my question. How can you be sure she was involved?'

'I am absolutely sure after what has happened here,' Palfrey answered. He hesitated before going on, 'We had reports of two or three young women arriving in the West Country by a form of rocket. At first we were inclined to dismiss the story as another version of the flying saucer legend, but we

investigated. Two of my agents were already in the area, finding out what they could about the barrenness. I assigned them to the rocket women. They found three—the one they called Sue and two others. Each girl, when approached, went berserk: you saw Sue go berserk today. They fought off my agents who were taken completely by surprise.' Palfrey paused again, looking very sombre; when he went on, Maddern sensed and could understand the fear in him. 'In her rage one of them said that the whole human race would die out.'

Maddern ejaculated, 'My God.'

'Yes,' Palfrey said, sombrely. 'Well, the "accidents" followed, this curious invisible pressure or force. And once I came down here the attacks were stepped up. I've come to believe the girls and the way they reached the area means that they see me as a threat to whoever is responsible for the barrenness. The message from your mysterious man suggests the same thing. But—' Palfrey broke off.

'What?' asked Maddern, after what seemed an interminable time.

'No one who knows me or Z5 could possibly expect the warning to have any effect. It was almost naive.'

'I see what you mean,' Maddern said gruffly. 'And I see why you can't take risks with Sue. She's your one clue, isn't she?'

'Yes,' Palfrey answered. 'The one clue. Well!' He became more brisk as he asked, 'How long will she be under sedation?'

'Probably another four or five hours.'

'What exactly did this man on the telephone say?'

'He told me not to allow you to talk to her. And he said that she mustn't go away with you.'

'Is that really all he said?'

'Yes. There was no overt threat, only an implied one. Do you know the man?'

'No,' answered Palfrey. 'It's the first time anyone has come into the open, if we can call that coming into the open, except for the girls. If you'd describe exactly what happened, from the moment he started to speak, I would be grateful.'

Maddern felt a little impatient but controlled himself and described precisely how the man had spoken, how he had sounded, and he remembered every word. When he finished, Palfrey said musingly, 'It sounds to me as if he might have been playing for time, after being shaken by Sue's capture. It's a remarkable thing,' he added, 'but men who think they have irresistible power in their hands become so out of touch with reality, that whenever they run up against effective opposition or a defeat, they lose their heads.'

'You make it sound as if such men are two-a-penny,' Maddern remarked. 'The question is, what are you going to do?'

'I know what I would like to do,' said Palfrey.

'What?'

'Keep her here.'

‘What good would that do?’

‘You could begin to treat her when she came round.’

‘I’m no psychiatrist.’

‘You aren’t far off,’ Palfrey said. ‘Is there a good psychiatrist in Middlecombe?’

Maddern hesitated, now being forced to think of two things at once, and wanting to give all his attention to the girl. He was fascinated by her. Even now it was hard to believe that a girl so delicate, so fragile-looking, could fight like a wildcat. He wanted to find out more about her, wanted to help her. This was simply part of his nature; he was a doctor and a healer by instinct and character as well as by training, but there was something more than that in his attitude towards this girl whom he did not know.

‘Yes,’ he said at last. ‘Congleton.’

‘Would he help?’ asked Palfrey.

Maddern considered the question and then answered, ‘You mean, would he take personal risks for a patient?’

Palfrey actually laughed.

‘You go devastatingly straight to the point. Yes. Would he?’

‘I should think so,’ answered Maddern. ‘I’d have to explain this particular risk.’

‘I wouldn’t object,’ Palfrey said. ‘Do you yourself fully understand it?’

‘Oh, yes,’ answered Maddern, without hesitation. ‘I might be pushed under a tractor by this invisible force any time!’

He laughed, in turn. ‘I think that’s one of my chief troubles, I never have a chance to take a risk, and I’m a pioneer by nature!’

He stood very close to Palfrey, looking down intently, while Palfrey returned his gaze with the same intentness. He looked much better. The pain and the weariness had gone from his eyes, and his cheeks had regained their healthy tan.

‘Well?’

‘Do I understand that you think that there is a man, or there are men, who have turned this and two other areas barren? That there are no children in the womb and so, in these parts of the world at least, there could be a gradual end of life?’

‘It could happen.’

‘And a man, a human being, is responsible?’

‘I think so.’

‘And he could spread the barrenness throughout the land?’

‘Obviously there is danger that he could,’ Palfrey said. ‘Until we find who is doing it, and how we don’t know for sure.’

‘If this is done by human agency, then someone has the power to control the birthrate. So, he can exert absolute control over man’s destiny.’ Maddern backed off a foot or two but did not look away. *‘Is* that what you mean?’

It was exactly what Palfrey meant and feared; it could not have been put more succinctly. This man had a mind of rare quality, rare positiveness. It was almost wrong to risk losing it in the present circumstances. There was

great intentness in Maddern, too; his whole body seemed to be on edge.

'Yes,' Palfrey said, at last. 'That is exactly what I mean.'

'Then I will help in every way I can,' Maddern said simply.

'The risks—' began Palfrey.

'I don't care about the risks. Apart from anything else, this would really give me something to live for, even if I lived only for a few days. I'd like to talk to Sue before calling Congleton. May I?'

'Don't lose any more time than you can help,' urged Palfrey.

'If you keep talking nonsense, I shall doubt whether you really want my help,' Maddern said, as if anger were returning.

It's a pity he's so touchy, Palfrey thought; it could be his Achilles' heel. But he smiled and answered mildly, 'Well, you shouldn't doubt it. You could even be grateful for the chance. It's not every day a country G.P. gets a chance to influence the future of humankind!' He paused, half expecting a sharp retort, but Maddern took that reproach without any show of resentment. 'The house will have to be surrounded. C.I.D. Special Branch men will be both inside and outside. Your housekeeper will probably hate it, and there's no telling how long it will last.'

For the first time, Maddern's expression seemed to brighten in delight, and he gave a deep, pleased chuckle.

'I can't imagine anything that would please Bertha Witherspoon more than to have a lot of young men about both night and day. I've a number of calls to make. May I make them?'

'Yes indeed. The more normal your movements the less suspicious our friend with the soft voice will be,' Palfrey replied. 'And I must be going.' He sprang to his feet, very lithe, looking not only better but younger. 'I'll arrange for the watch,' he promised. 'Will you wait until more men arrive, and then meet me at Middlecombe Police Station?'

'Yes,' Maddern said.

Within half an hour, six men were on the premises, two of them outside the door of the surgery, two in the garden near the surgery window and two moving freely about the house. And Maddern, after a word with Smith, who was in charge, followed after Palfrey.

Palfrey left Hallows End some time before the C.I.D. men arrived and drove in a closed Allard towards the local police headquarters. The Middlecombe Police Station was the local headquarters of the Corneshire County Constabulary, a modern building on the outskirts of the town. He was preceded by a local police car and followed by another. Being in the middle of a small procession did not appeal to him.

This was as bizarre a case as he could remember; more frightening, more horrifying than any he had known. Maddern had seen right through to the heart of the matter. If this was the work of some human agency, then that agency could exert absolute control over mankind's destiny, eventually over human behaviour. This was control over life and death in a way never

suspected before. It was control over *birth* and so over all of human life. If someone wanted to wipe out mankind . . .

He pushed the thought aside as he walked up the steps to the police station, and then up an open staircase to the Chief Superintendent's office. He shivered, despite the warmth of a room lit by the sun through a huge window. The desk, set across a corner, was empty but a man came from an adjoining office.

'Mr. King won't be a few minutes, sir. Please take a chair.'

'Thanks,' said Palfrey.

But he went to the window, shading his eyes against the sun with his hand. Beyond was a small square of old, timbered buildings and weathered brick walls; middle seventeenth century beyond any doubt.

What would happen if there were no more births?

'Stop it,' he said aloud, and almost savagely. He swung round from the window and as he did so, heard a man hurrying up the staircase, saying, 'I saw him come in.'

'But Dr. Simister—'

The policeman who called out to Simister broke off. Simister's head and shoulders appeared suddenly at the open staircase. A policeman wearing uniform and a helmet was a few steps behind him, and behind him, came Maddern. Simister glanced into this room, caught sight of Palfrey, and exclaimed, 'Here he is!'

'Dr. Simister—' the policeman began.

Simister said stormily, 'Palfrey—you must be mad!'

'I've been told so on occasion,' Palfrey said mildly. 'What makes you think so?'

'To come and put the fear of God into us like that!'

'The fear of death, don't you mean?' Palfrey asked.

'You *must* be mad! Every doctor who left the hospital this morning was shaken to his vitals.'

Palfrey repressed the obvious retort, and said, 'And has need to be.'

Simister now stood in front of him, wild-eyed, a striking-looking man so much more attractive to look at than Maddern.

'They'll go round and spread the story that every woman in this part of the world is barren!'

'Well,' Palfrey said coldly. 'Isn't that what it looks like?'

'No, they can't be. They—'

Simister broke off, as two men appeared from the passage. One, tall, massive, almost prophet-like, was Chief Superintendent King of the Middlecombe Police. The other was a small, middle-aged man who wore *pince nez,* the nosepiece fastened together by cotton twisted round and round. He had a button of a nose and a button of a mouth and his cheeks looked like dry leather.

'Dr. Simister!' exclaimed King.

Simister rounded on him.

'You've got to stop Palfrey,' he cried. 'You've got to stop him from

spreading alarm and despondency. What he says can't be true, it's impossible! You've got to—'

Suddenly, Simister broke off, staring at the smaller man as if he hadn't noticed him before. Now, he seemed appalled. Palfrey moved back a little, self-effacingly, to watch the others without playing a direct part in this little tragicomedy.

'Dale!' he gasped.

The little man nodded, a mannerism more than agreement.

'Dale!' Simister gasped again. 'What—what on Earth is he doing here?' Now Simister turned towards the police Superintendent. 'Are you mad, too? To allow the Press—Good God! If this story gets out there could be panic. My God, this has to be hushed up until—until the truth is known. And you allow Dale—' He broke off almost incoherent with distress or despair or with rage. 'Don't print a word. Do you understand, don't print a word! To do so would be lunacy!'

Into a curiously static pool of silence, the newspaperman said quietly, 'If it's true, then the story must be told, Dr. Simister.'

'It can't be true!'

'It is quite true that there are no cases at the pre-natal clinic,' interrupted Dale. 'But don't worry, doctor, we won't print anything against the public interest.'

'But this whole story would be against the public interest!' cried Simister, his voice almost a screech.

Dale said, 'Have you a patient expecting a child?'

'No, but—'

'Do you know of any doctor in the district who has?' demanded Dale. Then, with a glance at Palfrey, he went on, 'The only possible justification for not printing the truth about this phenomenon is that by keeping silent we might help to find out who is behind it.' He turned to Palfrey and asked with the same forthrightness as Maddern had shown earlier, 'Do you think we should keep silent, Dr. Palfrey? That is what my editor sent me to find out.'

Chapter Seven

THE NEWS BREAKS

Palfrey looked from Simister's taut, near-despairing face to the newspaperman's leathery one in which the periwinkle-blue eyes were very deep-set, then to the massive police Superintendent whose bland features showed no emotion at all, and on to Maddern. Maddern looked as he usually did; acutely intelligent in spite of his flabbiness.

'You can't let such news out!' cried Simister; he was almost gasping. 'It would cause panic up and down the country. You *can't* release it. Why, every woman in Britain would be afraid in case she was affected.'

Superintendent King said, 'A lot of them would heave a great sigh of relief, too.'

'Don't make a joke of it!' Simister cried.

'No joke. Simple fact,' stated the Superintendent.

'Do you have an opinion, Dr. Maddern?' asked Palfrey, mildly.

'Yes,' said Maddern. 'Release the story, but—'

'You must all be mad!' screeched Simister.

'If anyone here is mad, it's you,' barked Maddern.

Simister, staring at him, lips working, hands clenched tightly by his side, made a sudden movement towards him. Before Palfrey had time to realise what he was doing, the Superintendent shot out a huge arm. The force of his movement sent Simister back a pace, and as he recovered the policeman said, 'Try not to get too excited, doctor, *if* you please.' He shifted his massive body until it was between Simister and Maddern.

There was something like contempt in Maddern's eyes.

'I should release the story, if it were my responsibility, but present it simply as a natural phenomenon. I wouldn't suggest that it was caused by either outer space or human agency. There will be plenty of newspapermen and television and radio experts who will theorise about those possibilities. But I agree with Dale—you can't keep such a situation secret.'

Dale turned to Palfrey, 'What's your decision, sir?'

'As a newspaperman, what is your opinion?'

'I'm with Dr. Maddern. I would release the story very carefully.'

'But it will do terrible harm!' cried Simister.

'Not so much as if it's spread by rumour,' retorted Dale. 'And when Dr. Palfrey knows who's behind it, the whole truth can be told.'

Palfrey said mildly, 'I'm sure you're right. I'm going to London for consultations now, and I think the authorities will also say "release it".'

'Supposing they don't?' asked Maddern.

'We'll jump that fence when we reach it,' replied Palfrey, looking at Dale. 'If I can give you a head start of the national Press, I will,' he promised. 'You publish in the evening, don't you?'

‘Four o’clock,’ Dale told him, with a wintry smile. ‘Giving me and the *Echo* a scoop isn’t important, Dr. Palfrey, but it’s nice of you to think of it. I *would* like to do a piece on you, though, and about the attacks on you and your men, and if I could break that with the London newspapers—’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Thank you!’ Dale positively crowed. ‘I appreciate that very much.’

‘For God’s sake stop talking like a lot of morons!’ cried Simister. ‘To hear you anyone would think this was just some everyday event which belonged to newspaper headlines!’

‘For the time being, that’s exactly what we want,’ replied Palfrey, ‘to keep the dearth of pregnancies in the background and concentrate on the attacks on me. No reason why you shouldn’t speculate about the reasons, Mr. Dale. I can tell you that there have been three direct attacks on my life—’

He gave Dale all the details he could, talked of the girl Susan and the attacks in the orchard, described what he called ‘some unidentifiable, invisible force’, and then, with Simister almost writhing, made a simple statement.

‘You can say that I am in Middlecombe as the head of the international organisation known as Z5. Enough?’ he asked.

‘Plenty, sir!’

‘I must register a formal protest,’ said Simister, the vigour of his protest sapped. ‘And if the consequences are disastrous you will only have yourselves to blame.’ He turned and stalked out.

King ran the back of his hand over his nose, like a small boy without a handkerchief, and there was a glimmer of a smile in his eyes when he turned to Palfrey.

‘The meeting’s due for eight o’clock, sir. Are you going to eat first? Very welcome to have a meal in our canteen, or a snack for you and Dr. Maddern sent up here. Or at your hotel, whichever suits you.’

‘Here would be fine,’ said Palfrey. ‘Thank you. Will some

coffee and sandwiches suit you, Maddern?’

‘Am I to be at this meeting?’ asked Maddern.

‘I’d like you to be,’ said Palfrey.

‘Exactly what is the meeting about?’ asked Maddern.

‘Heads of all the main council departments,’ said King, adding with that smile lurking in his eyes, ‘I’ll be there, too! I’ll fix those sandwiches and then leave you while I nip home for half an hour. My kids raise merry hell if I don’t see them before they go to bed.’

‘You carry on,’ said Palfrey, and when the door closed he motioned Maddern to a chair. ‘Give me a few minutes to think,’ he pleaded, and sat back, looking, as if for inspiration, at the ceiling. When he began to speak it was as if he were talking to himself. ‘Maddern, to a man of your temperament I know that this affair must be exasperating and frustrating. And there is so much background which I simply can’t pass on to you. Already you have had some briefing, but it isn’t enough. Much depends on what you absorb from what you hear.’ His voice strengthened and he sat up.

‘Now I’m going to telephone my London headquarters,’ he went on. ‘If you listen in at that extension it will give you still more of the background.’ He leaned forward and put in a call to a Mayfair number, and after the operator, a woman with a very pleasant voice spoke.

‘Hallo, Sap.’

‘Hallo, Joyce,’ Palfrey responded, taking out a pencil and beginning to doodle. ‘Is there any news from Headquarters end?’

‘Not a word,’ the woman answered.

‘How many agents did we ask to check?’ asked Palfrey.

‘Key agents in every city and rural district,’ answered Joyce. ‘Surely you remember.’

‘Yes. Dr. Maddern is on the extension and I want him to know the basic facts,’ Palfrey said.

‘You mean, he is to help us?’

‘Yes.’

The woman sounded faintly disapproving.

‘Very well, if that’s what you want.’

‘Perhaps I’d better introduce you,’ Palfrey said, smiling faintly. ‘Dr. Reginald Maddern, I am speaking to Miss Joyce Morgan, my personal assistant.’

‘Miss Morgan,’ Maddern said, sounding slightly nettled.

‘Good evening, Dr. Maddern.’ There was now no doubt at all that Joyce was disapproving; or at least, not even remotely enthusiastic. ‘Sap, we requested over eleven thousand agents throughout the world to report if the birthrate in any area appeared to be sharply or sensationally reduced, and so far not a single reply has come in.’

‘So we’ve only a local problem, so far,’ remarked Palfrey.

‘It looks like it,’ answered Joyce. ‘Are *you* all right?’

‘Thanks to Dr. Maddern, I’m feeling fine!’ Palfrey appeared to be in a very good mood, and also determined to cheer Joyce up. ‘I’ve a meeting with the Clerk to the Middlecombe Rural District Council tonight. The Chief Engineer, the Medical Officer, the heads of the gas, water, electricity and highways departments will be here, with the Postmaster, the Chief of Police, the Secretary of the local hospital, the Housing Department manager, representatives of the Chamber of Trade, Rotary and other goodwill clubs and the headmasters of the State schools and the only sizeable private school in the area.’ Palfrey brought all these names out fluently, an impressive tribute to his memory. ‘Each of these has been briefed with the basic facts and asked to find out if they know of any possible contributary causes.’

When Palfrey paused, Joyce said with a laugh in her voice, ‘That should be quite a meeting!’

Palfrey was smiling when he rang off; so was Maddern.

Twenty-two men and three women were in the Council Chamber at eight o’clock that evening. They sat at one of the biggest oval tables Palfrey had

ever seen, within easy earshot of each other. The table, of mahogany, had a beautiful lustre; the chairs, with padded seats and arms, were of the same rich wood. Palfrey sat at one end of the table and the Chairman of the Council sat opposite him, some twenty feet away. Maddern was next to Palfrey, and a shiny-headed young man was on the Chairman's right. King, huge and looming large above the others was on the Chairman's other side. The Chairman was a broad- shouldered man with a big, reddish-brown face, short-cut hair, and a thick grey tweed suit which was in sharp contrast to his narrow black tie.

His voice had a pleasant West Country burr.

'Well, gentlemen and Dr. Palfrey,' he said, 'each of us knows what we're here for, there's no need for me to say it all over again. Or, as there are some among us who are not familiar with everyone present I'll ask everyone who speaks to state his position. Save a lot of time if we did that. Mr. Cobb,' he repeated.

A small, almost wizened man, dressed in a russet-brown suit, stood up.

'Benjamin Cobb, Borough Engineer,' he announced crisply. 'I immediately checked the water supplies, sir. We take a daily sample and have a full analysis each day at twelve noon—have done since that typhoid scare in 1937. Nothing abnormal has been reported which appears related to the present emergency. Copies of each analysis are being made and will be available early tomorrow morning.' He glanced at Palfrey, obviously for approval. 'Tests have also been made at Combe Weir Plant—the reservoir plant and at the one sewage disposal plant. It should perhaps be stated that all the water for the area comes from the Weir Plant. No water enters the public mains, except from there, until after the most stringent tests.'

'What would you do if the water became contaminated?' asked Palfrey.

'Switch to supplies from the South Wales and Gloucestershire plants.

'Has there been any such switch in the past nine months?'

'No, Dr. Palfrey.'

'Perhaps it would be better if you addressed your remarks to the Chair,' the Chairman murmured, half-apologetically.

Palfrey said, 'Mr. Chairman, through you may I ask if there are any wells in the rural district area?'

'Wells?' echoed the Chairman. 'Well, yes, I've got one at my farm. There are quite a lot in the district, Mr. Cobb, aren't there?'

'Seventy-three,' replied Cobb promptly. 'But none connects with the mains supply. Each is confined to its own private grounds. There is no independent town or village supply. Although the local well-water is good it contains an excessive supply of chalk, making it very hard, and the mains water is of course softened.'

'By chemicals?' asked Palfrey.

'Yes. You seem to be—I'm sorry, Mr. Chairman, I must say that Dr. Palfrey appears to be implying—'

'Surely he's not implying anything,' soothed the Chairman. 'We're just establishing the facts.'

‘And I am *giving* the facts.’ The nut-cracker face was flushed, the Chief Engineer seemed very put out.

‘Thank you, Mr. Chairman,’ Palfrey said. ‘One or two things emerge very clearly. There is a daily test, which is admirable. There are chemicals added to the water for purification and softening—do you use fluoride in Middlecombe?’

‘Not so far as I know,’ said the Chairman. ‘Eh, Benjamin?’

‘We do not.’

‘Any other additives?’ asked Palfrey.

‘There is a complete list beginning with chlorine,’ began Cobb, only to break off as Palfrey asked the Chairman, ‘Can we be told how often these additives are put in?’

‘Daily!’ Cobb almost exploded.

‘If additives went in at the Weir Plant, how long would they remain in the main supply lines?’ enquired Palfrey.

‘They would be cleared within twenty-four hours,’ Cobb stated. ‘I do wish to make it clear, Mr. Chairman, that the supplies are fresh *daily*. All surplus supplies return to the Weir Plant so that any impurities which may have been acquired along the day can be cleansed.’

‘What kind of contamination is possible?’ asked Palfrey.

‘We have dye works, Mr. Chairman, two abattoirs, several cleaners, two industrial areas, one tannery. In this age some kind of contamination is inevitable.’

‘Yes, of course,’ Palfrey said. ‘If anything were added to the main supply it would be in the domestic supply for twenty-three hours, say, before being retested.’

‘Yes.’

‘So if there were an additive at a given time, and the water containing the additive was cleansed at the Weir Plant before being circulated again there is a possibility of contamination lasting for twenty-three hours.’

The engineer did not reply immediately.

‘Mr. Cobb,’ asked the Chairman.

‘It *could* happen,’ Cobb conceded, grudgingly. ‘But the chances are—’

‘Got to be sure,’ the Chairman declared. ‘Have you any more questions about water, Dr. Palfrey?’

‘No. Not at this juncture, thank you.’

‘Thank you, Mr. Cobb. Now, George—Mr. Gregory.’ The Chairman looked at a plump, pale-faced man sitting next to Cobb.

This man stood up, and in a markedly mellifluent voice, announced, ‘I am the Medical Officer in charge of the Department of Health in Middlecombe Rural District Council.’ His smile encompassed everybody, and was quite charming. ‘I have investigated *very* closely. No report of any epidemic among women and children has been made during the period under review —that is, the past ten months. All milk, all foodstuffs of every kind are inspected daily by my staff. Occasionally supplies have been rejected because they did not reach the standard laid down by the Ministry of Health

but there is no record of any such foodstuff rejected which would, if taken by the public, have had any effect on the male or the female reproductive organisms. Copies of our records will be available—'

'Just a moment,' the Chairman interrupted. 'What foodstuff does *every*body take?'

'Everybody?'

'Yes—man, woman and child.'

'We only want those who could—' began a young woman sitting next to King.

'Better have everybody,' insisted the Chairman.

'Milk,' stated Gregory. 'Water. After infancy, of course, there is bread, tea, coffee, soft or aerated drinks—'

'Beer,' a man put in and there was a general chuckle.

'Potatoes—never heard of anyone who didn't eat potatoes!'

'The tests are carried out on *all* of these,' insisted Gregory. 'I can assure you, Mr. Chairman, that *none* of the samples tested have shown any constituent which might affect—'

'No one yet knows what might affect either a man or a woman,' Maddern interrupted, to everyone's surprise but Palfrey's. 'All we need to know is what's been found in those foodstuffs which is common to all teenagers, children and adults. Everyone seems to assume that the effect on the woman is the only thing in question. Supposing this stuff, whatever it is, sterilises the male? And how do we know that only pregnancy is involved? How do we know that the blood isn't contaminated? Or the heart, or the mind?' There was a startled pause, a kind of mass intake of breath, before he added with a growl, 'And if we go on talking like a lot of old windbags, we'll never know the answers.'

Chapter Eight

LONDON

Gregory looked as if he would explode. Cobb glared, furious. The Chairman raised his eyes, and Palfrey took the opportunity to speak.

'We have to be quick and we also have to be thorough,' he observed. 'And there are a lot of other things, common to all households. Gas, for instance. Certain domestic detergents. Even electricity could be effective—certain types of lamp are used to kill flies and insects. An electrical current could affect everyone.'

'Let's hear from you, Charlie,' the Chairman said.

A tall, youthful man said, 'I'm gas. And we've no evidence to show that —" He went on, brisk and to the point.

'Electricity.' The Chairman called next.

'Electricity' was a big, hearty, positive man who had no evidence of unusual use of, or effects of, electricity.

One after another the Department chiefs stood up, and no one had any constructive ideas; while no one, from now on, talked too much or argued. One of the women was busy all the time, recording the reports; the second woman, to Palfrey's surprise, stood up when the Chairman called, 'Highways and byways.'

'Transport—Miss Heather,' the woman said briskly. 'Not everyone travels on our buses, but everyone uses our roads. And everyone is affected by petrol and diesel fumes. If I may make a passing comment, Mr. Chairman, obviously the water supply and electricity are the most likely means of distribution—after that come milk or bread.'

She sat down, while Gregory still glowered and Cobb appeared to sulk.

Palfrey caught the Chairman's eye, and for the first time since the meeting started, he stood up.

'I agree largely with Miss Heather,' he said. 'But we might well have overlooked several possibilities. If you will concentrate on local conditions, you might come up with the truth we're looking for. Meanwhile, don't be surprised when the news breaks if you are visited by swarms of newspapermen and photographers, and hordes of sightseers.' He looked across at King. 'I imagine you will have some very serious traffic problems tomorrow, Superintendent. You may need a lot of help. Mr. Chairman, *very* many thanks for arranging this meeting.'

He turned; Maddern followed; and almost before the meeting realised it they were out of the big committee-room.

'So you *can* move fast,' said Maddern, drily.

'I'm going to be in London within the hour,' Palfrey said. 'Did you get in touch with your psychiatrist friend—Dr. Congleton?'

'He'll see the patient with me tonight and again in the morning,' Maddern

announced. ‘Palfrey—’

‘Yes?’

‘Do you think it is the water? Or milk? Or—’

‘So far, your guess is as good as mine,’ retorted Palfrey. ‘The chief hope of early results is probably through that young woman.’ They were in the stone hall of the Council Offices, and a doorman came from a little room beneath the stairs. He opened the front door, big and heavy and iron-studded.

As he did so, there came a high-pitched, screeching sound followed by a roaring wind which swept down the stairs. The doorman was blown out into the road, Maddern was swept off his feet, while Palfrey, feeling as if all the breath had been sucked out of his body, was hurled against the wall.

It happened before they could think or react; they were picked up as by a maelstrom.

Then, the ceiling began to fall and the walls to cave in, and as the whole building collapsed, the agonising screams of men and women grew louder and louder.

The ambulances came, the doctors arrived and the firemen were rushed to that chamber of death and despair.

Palfrey stepped out of a helicopter on the landing pier which had been built near Lambeth Bridge, close by the weathered red-brick London home of the Archbishop of Canterbury. He was met by two men, agents of Z5, who escorted him to a car with a Jamaican driver at the wheel. The driver took one look at Palfrey’s face and welcome froze on his own.

Joyce Morgan was sitting in a corner of the car. It was the first time Palfrey could recall her having come to meet him outside Headquarters without his specific request. He was so on edge that he had to force himself to speak normally.

‘Hallo, Joyce. Urgent news?’

‘Not urgent in one way but urgent in another,’ she answered. Her voice was very tense, her manner strange. ‘Sap, this isn’t a secret to be kept from the people. You can play about with their lives, and you often have, but this is very different. I don’t think you realise its personal significance. I simply had to come and tell you how strongly I feel.’

‘I think I know,’ Palfrey said, gently.

‘I’m not sure that you do. And I’m not sure you’re capable of making the right decision.’ There was a defiant expression on her face as she said that. ‘You’ve been overworking for years. You—you’ve become a confirmed bachelor. You’re a celibate by preference.’ She couldn’t be sure of that; only that he had overcome a hundred moments of temptation to live with, to sleep with, her. ‘You’ve no right to make decisions about this, or influence others. You may feel the responsibility is yours but it isn’t. Not this time.’

In a way Palfrey was angered by this outburst; in another, he felt only compassion. There was so much more in what she said than the words themselves.

She had loved him for years.

She had so longed to marry or to live with him.

And he had not been ready for either, clinging as they both knew to the distant presence of his dead wife. He could tell how deeply Joyce felt over this subject, but was she speaking out of bitterness? Was she blaming him for not giving her a child? Was she saying that he had no right to make decisions since he had denied himself, for so many years, the right to fatherhood?

She could not feel he had denied her any right to motherhood, yet she might feel that he knew how exclusive was her love for him, and that if her child could not be by him, then she would have none.

Whatever the reasons, he sensed a great difference from the Joyce he had known for so long; a difference which, when he looked back, he realised had been developing for several months.

Soon, they were being driven along Whitehall. There were cars in front of and behind him, and on the roofs of the great Government buildings police were watching. At every turret and parapet a man was on guard. Instead of the usual two or three uniformed policemen close to the door of No. 10 Downing Street, there were at least a dozen. These officers were keeping back a press of newspapermen and sightseers, which approached both from the steps leading to St. James's Park, and Whitehall.

The door of No. 10 opened and Palfrey was ushered through. Almost at once, he was taken to the office of the Prime Minister, Sir Douglas Hartwall, and with the tall, aesthetic-looking Hartwall there was Maddison Keys, the Home Secretary.

'Sit down, Palfrey—Brandy?—' The Prime Minister, determined to be both hospitable and imperturbable, poured out and then proffered cigars. He cut the end off one when Palfrey refused, while Maddison Keys lit a cigarette in a white holder.

'How serious is the situation?' Hartwall asked, dropping into an easy chair, still determined to be urbanely at ease. 'Who survived in this shocking explosion?'

'The chief of police wasn't badly hurt,' Palfrey answered. 'And a Miss Heather, sitting next to him, was hardly touched at all.' His voice grew chill as he went on, 'The rest are either dead or dying.'

'Dreadful,' Hartwall murmured. 'Dreadful.'

'Do we know how it was done?' demanded Maddison Keys.

'Not yet,' Palfrey answered. 'But it appeared to be some form of pressure, quite invisible, which had the effect of an explosion. No known explosives were used.' He put his hand to his forehead, as if wearily. 'We've encountered something similar but on a much smaller scale several times.'

'Do you think this particular attack was an attempt on your life?' asked Hartwall.

'I would doubt if it were only that,' Palfrey said. 'It is much more likely to have been intended as a warning to me—and so to all authorities, sir—to keep off. Killing me would be simply incidental.'

‘So you are presumably very close to the ring-leaders,’ remarked Keys. ‘Have you yet any idea who is involved, Palfrey?’

‘Not the faintest idea at all,’ admitted Palfrey. ‘All I do know is that soon after I began to investigate the phenomenon, attempts were made on my life and my agents were killed. It does look as if I’m pretty near a closely guarded secret of a method which can make all female mammals including women barren; or all males and so all men sterile. I asked for official C.I.D. protection instead of relying on my own agents, Mr. Keys, because I’d found you and the police generally reluctant to believe there was any cause for anxiety.’

‘Well, we believe there is now,’ remarked Keys, gruffly. ‘We lost four men from the Special Branch tonight. Have you any idea at all, Palfrey? Don’t you even know whether you *are* on the verge of a discovery?’ His manner became almost accusing.

‘The one positive clue is that the young women I told you about in my report appear to arrive by a rocket capsule, which could have come from a neighbouring county, halfway across the world, or from outer space,’ Palfrey answered, nettled. ‘It wasn’t until after the capsules were discovered that my agents ran into trouble.’

‘Can you define this “trouble”?’ asked Hartwall.

‘In a way,’ answered Palfrey. ‘They reported—and I have experienced—a pressure, somewhat like a high wind concentrated on one part of the body. Three times it struck me on the back and halfway down my thighs, and propelled me forward. It stopped, or was withdrawn, without warning. A similar kind of force could have caused the damage in Middlecombe tonight. Whether it is produced by these capsules—’

‘Have you put those under guard?’ Hartwall demanded.

‘There wasn’t a chance,’ Palfrey said. ‘They burned to ashes within minutes of being discovered, and the ashes were scattered by what was thought to be the wind but may have been the force I’ve told you about.’ He spread his hands. ‘There isn’t another thing I can tell you, I’m afraid. Except that we do have the girl we’ve called “Sue” captive. She needs to be placed under strict security and to be closely watched and examined. But that’s not going to be easy.’

‘My men were watching her at this Dr. Maddern’s house,’ Keys said. ‘She will be removed under armed guard, and placed under constant surveillance.’ He coughed into his hand, stubbed out his cigarette and asked, ‘What do you suggest that we now do?’

‘As I’ve said earlier—break the story, as gently as it can be broken. And then warn all governments of the possibility of danger.’

‘But your overseas agents show negative results,’ protested Keys. ‘Your office telephoned me about this. Why do we need to cause worldwide alarm if this is purely a local problem? It could be, you know. It could be some crazed creature who’s got a special hate for the British. It could even be some psychopathic Englishman who says “If you won’t keep your population down we will do it for you.” We don’t know what there is to warn the other

nations about, and we really don't want to make ourselves laughing stocks.'

'There isn't much laughter in Middlecombe tonight,' Palfrey rejoined softly.

'That's an emotional argument and we've got to use reason,' insisted Keys stubbornly. 'Don't you think so, Douglas?'

The Prime Minister, who had been looking from one man to the other, picked up his brandy glass and sniffed the bouquet with great deliberation. Palfrey found it almost impossible to hide his impatience. True, he could go over the Prime Minister's head and approach world governments, but it needed the full weight of Great Britain to make the fullest impression.

'I think we should be advised by Palfrey,' Hartwall decided at last.

'Palfrey hasn't yet convinced *me* that we can't cope with the situation ourselves,' Keys protested. 'Good God! This could be a purely local phenomenon, confined to Middlecombe, Tan-y-bas in North Wales and Wetherly in Northumberland. It could be the result of some experiment in birth control which has got out of hand. Or—' He caught his breath.

'It could be an experiment in birth control,' Palfrey agreed. 'The moment I began to investigate the phenomenon and found the capsules the attacks on me began. Certainly they know I'm in charge of Z5 and know Z5 has international influence; and clearly they don't want that influence exerted.'

A tap at the door cut across his words, and one of Hartwall's young secretaries came in on the Prime Minister's call; an amiable-looking young man with golden hair.

'I'm sorry to interrupt, Prime Minister, but there is a telephone call for Dr. Palfrey.'

Palfrey sprang up, knowing that this was of exceptional importance, or Joyce—the only person who knew where he was—wouldn't have called.

'May I take it here, sir?'

'The blue telephone,' said Hartwall.

Palfrey moved to a side table and picked up the receiver, aware of the intent gaze of the other two men.

'Yes, Joyce,' he said.

'Sap,' said Joyce Morgan, almost breathlessly, 'the premises of the *Middlecombe Echo* have been blown up. The composing room was utterly destroyed. The reporter you talked to, Dale, was in the room.'

It was such a red-letter night for Eric Dale.

He had been in journalism since he had left school at the age of fourteen and never progressed beyond the post of chief reporter. He was utterly dedicated to local news, and for over twenty years he had worked on the *Echo*. In all of those years he had never had to cover a case of major importance, and now that it had come, he felt in his bones that it was one of epoch-making significance. After seeing Palfrey, he had telephoned the story of the attacks on the Z5 Chief to several London newspapers but, keeping strictly to his word, had not even hinted at the cause.

Then he had written his own story with elaborate care.

He let no one else read it, and, rather than allow it to be read at any stage before publication, he set it himself on an old Monotype machine while two Linotype compositors were busy on their more modern typesetters. The room was hot and the odour of the molten lead was sharp on the nostrils. It worked its way into one's mouth, and then dried the tongue. He was sitting on a high stool at a sloping desk, reading some pulls, oblivious of the dozen printers and boys all about him.

Quite suddenly, the floor seemed to rise up.

Dale, pen in one hand, galley proof under the pressure of his other hand, was killed when a piece of metal from the smashed Monotype behind him crashed on to his head. Everywhere men were gasping and screaming, there was

molten metal on the floor, on hands and legs and faces—

'So the story's killed,' Palfrey said bleakly into the telephone.

'The editor was at home,' said Joyce. 'He told me that Dale wouldn't let anyone, not even his boss, read what he'd said, and Dale was so trustworthy that he was given *carte blanche.* No proofreader saw the story, Sap. No one knows what he was going to say about the phenomenon.'

'Did he telephone the London newspapers?' asked Palfrey.

'The editor says yes, but only about the attacks on you. Sap,' went on Joyce, only to hesitate for a moment. 'Sap, *should* you release the story after all?'

'What makes you have any doubts?' asked Palfrey. 'You seemed so positive.'

'I've thought about what harm it might possibly do, after all. And—' She broke off.

'Yes?'

'They don't want it told, do they?'

'You mean, the perpetrator of all these outrages,' asked Palfrey, sounding quite ingenuous. 'No, he wouldn't like it at all.'

'If he simply wanted to exert power, surely he wouldn't care,' retorted Joyce. 'I wonder—'

She broke off again. There was something in her silence, in the way she caught her breath, which alarmed Palfrey. He was aware of the intentness of the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary as they watched him on the telephone; his apprehensiveness must have revealed itself to them.

At last, Joyce said, 'Sap, he's been on the telephone.'

'The man who talked to Maddern?' asked Palfrey, sharply.

'Yes.' Joyce seemed to gulp.

'Go on,' Palfrey urged. 'Let's have it.'

'He says that if you release the story, he will infect another area, this time covering many more people,' Joyce told him, her voice sounding far off, as if she had no strength. 'He says that instead of a few thousand women being affected, hundreds of thousands will be, not only here but in many countries abroad.' Joyce stopped again: she seemed to gasp for breath, but began to

force words out. ‘Sap, don’t—don’t release the story. It can’t help; I’ve come to the conclusion that it can only do terrible harm.’

She was obviously in great distress, and he had no doubt at all that it was the thought of the women condemned to childlessness which affected her.

And he thought bleakly that her second thoughts must be right; that it would be better to try to discover exactly what was going on, before breaking the news. He listened with the greatest intensity as, making an obvious effort to control her emotions, Joyce went on, ‘Sap, all of the areas affected are being checked exhaustively. No other capsules have been found or reported; no girls like Sue have appeared. There is no known way in which the affliction could have spread nor the slightest indication of how it could be confined to a specified area. It is now virtually certain, from all the reports from the other afflicted areas, that contamination is not by the domestic water supply, electricity or gas. Everyone involved in every kind of distribution must be asked to think back, to help.’

‘Unless they’re told why, they’ll never begin to try,’ Palfrey reasoned. ‘And if a lot more people are told in confidence, the story is bound to leak out publicly.’

‘Oh, you stubborn fool, you’ll tell the world in spite of everything!’ she cried.

And she rang off.

Palfrey stood in the Prime Minister’s study, aware of Hartwall’s tension and of the way Keys was staring. He simply did not know what to do or say. He was virtually sure that if he told either of these men they would urge—in fact order—him to keep the story back.

The fact that they would feel so strongly did not make them right. The fact that Joyce and Dr. Simister felt so strongly did not make them right, either. But much more was involved than that. *He* felt strongly that the truth should be divulged, and so did Maddern: but the strength of their views did not make him right. He was at the crunch of decision.

‘Well?’ Hartwall almost barked.

‘We have been ordered not to disclose the news, under threat of the contamination of more areas,’ Palfrey stated in his calmest voice.

‘In *England*?’ demanded Hartwall.

‘The man who telephoned said that it would be not only here but abroad and in metropolitan districts.’

‘Douglas, you know what this means,’ said Maddison Keys, his voice sharp with excitement. ‘Nowhere else is affected yet. If we keep the news back at least until we know what the perpetrators want, the situation can’t become any worse. If we disclose it, then hundreds of thousands of more families will be affected. We can’t take that risk. But if we tell every government individually, or tell the United Nations, you can be sure that someone will talk.’

The awful thing, Palfrey kept on reminding himself, was that he could not be sure which was the right course. It wasn’t a clear-cut issue. Keys was

certainly right when he said that the wrong policy could lead to utter disaster. But at least one thing was now virtually certain: the cause of the phenomenon was a human agency. Human beings could control a woman's ability to conceive a child: the most intimate, the most personal of all decisions could be taken away from husband and wife. And it was possible, it might even be probable, that if he held his peace and was silent, he might find the men involved, their purpose, and their method.

Hartwall finished his brandy and then said abruptly, 'I still think you have to make the decision, Palfrey. But I am inclined to the view that the facts should be disclosed.'

'Keep silent, or I will create barrenness among many hundreds of thousands,' the man who had warned Joyce had said.

From the beginning of his knowledge, Palfrey had been under deadly attack—obviously, to silence him.

If those who could cause this horror were so anxious not to tell the world, then surely the world should be told.

What certainty was there that other areas of this country and of many others were not at the beginning of a cycle which would result, in seven or eight or nine months time, in the same dread effect as in Middlecombe, Tan-y-bas and Wetherly?

Make up your mind, he told himself. The decision's been left to you.

Chapter Nine

DECISION

Palfrey thought, I need everybody's help; everybody's.

And he thought, this is a matter for every single human being to decide for himself. It isn't a question of saving lives; of political freedom; it is an issue which is absolutely fundamental to all men and all women. No one has any right to make such decisions for them, and they can only make decisions if they know the facts.

He knew, as this raced through his mind, what he would have to do—there was really no alternative. He felt calmer than he had for a long time as he said, 'Will you make a statement yourself, sir?'

'Tell the people?'

'Yes.'

'I think—'

'Douglas,' interrupted Keys with passionate intensity, 'you mustn't do this. Any young woman who wants a baby and doesn't catch will think it's because of this phenomenon, will think she never *will* conceive. Think of the awful social consequences. We're in an age of sexual permissiveness, the pill has made promiscuity safe and relatively easy, but this—why, it will give absolute sexual freedom, *licence* to everyone in the land. It will be utterly disastrous.'

'I don't think you are thinking straight,' said Hartwall. He was now much more decisive in manner than Palfrey expected. 'If this affliction became nationwide—'

'But the man behind it says he'll make it effective in a city if we talk! Three rural areas already affected, now a city—I tell you it will bring a sexual revolution in the country, all the bonds of marriage will be broken, all the bounds of

decency will be down. I beg you not to make any statement.'

'As I see it, I don't have any choice,' said Hartwall, crisply. 'I agree with Palfrey.'

He broke off when there was a tap at the door, glanced towards it and said irritably, 'I told them not to disturb me.' There was another tap, so soon after the first that it carried a note of insistence, and he raised his voice, sounding very angry. 'What is it?'

The door opened and the golden-haired secretary came in, looking flustered, carrying a single sheet of paper in his hand.

'I thought you ought to see this, sir.'

Hartwall almost snatched the paper from his hand, began to read and went absolutely still. Palfrey on one side and Keys on the other moved so as to read the paper over his shoulders. The words PRESS RELEASE were stamped across one corner in bright red, and there were three short

paragraphs centred on the paper, obviously done on a duplicating machine. The corner heading was:

South West News Agency, Bristol 21.
Is The Human Race Dying Out?

> In several parts of the British Isles and we believe in several other parts of the Western World, whole areas, affecting tens of thousands of women, have become a human desert. There are no children on the way in any of these places. The women are barren or the men are sterile.
>
> If this process spreads then the future of the whole human race is at stake. In fact the human race could be dying out.
>
> Secret investigations by Z5, the international organisation led by Dr. Stanislaus Alexander Palfrey have failed to find any explanation. Dr. Palfrey himself has been the subject of murderous assaults since his investigations began.

Hartwall put the paper down slowly and glanced at Palfrey with a resigned, even a quizzical air.

'Someone jumped the gun,' he remarked.

'Did you release that?' demanded Keys, in cold anger.

'Don't be absurd,' Palfrey said sharply. 'I've never heard of this South West News Agency.' In one way he was relieved, for the responsibility had been snatched out of his hands, but who had made the release? Which newspapers would use it? And what would the consequences be? He had envisaged a carefully worded statement to break the ice; this would have the effect of a bombshell.

'Where did it come from?' asked Hartwall.

'It was delivered with a selection of the usual nightly Press Releases,' the golden-haired secretary said. 'None of the others is significant.'

'Get the agency on the telephone,' Palfrey growled.

Neither Hartwall nor Keys spoke, but read the release again, standing side by side. Palfrey stood by the telephone until it began to ring; in a flash he had the receiver at his ear. Controlling his voice, he said, 'Is that the South West News Agency?'

'Yes, but—' a man began.

'I am speaking for the Home Secretary,' Palfrey interrupted. 'Where did you obtain and why did you send out the sterility story?'

'But we didn't!' the man cried. 'It was added to one of our releases but no one here knows who did it. If I'd seen it I would have killed the story stone dead.'

Palfrey said, 'Try to find out who slipped it in, will you?' He rang off and reported to the others. Keys was badly shaken, Hartwall took it much more phlegmatically than Palfrey had expected.

'Well, the decision has been made for us,' he said, 'and perhaps—'

He broke off as a man shouted out from beyond the door 'It's on television!' Almost at once Hartwall spun round and switched on a television in a corner, a set which Palfrey hadn't noticed. There was a tense pause, over surprisingly quickly, before first the voice and then a picture came.

' "—the future of the human race", goes on the statement, "is at stake. In fact the human race could be dying out".'

There was a pause and then in the background a picture of Palfrey. Only Keys glanced round at him: Keys was as antagonistic as Simister had been.

'According to this statement—and I quote again—secret investigations by Z5, the international organisation led by Dr. Stanislaus Alexander Palfrey have failed to result in any explanation. Dr. Palfrey himself has been the victim of murderous assaults since his investigations began.'

The picture of Palfrey faded.

The announcer, youthful and rugged-looking, braced his shoulders.

'And now for the weather report, by—'

The Prime Minister switched off and the screen went dark. Someone had closed the door and only the secretary, Keys, Palfrey and the Prime Minister were in the room. Keys was muttering to himself, 'They should never have done it. It will cause alarm and despondency throughout the country.' In a louder voice he went on, 'You were wrong. *Now* perhaps you'll realise it.' He drew a deep breath, faced Hartwall and said with great precision and clarity, 'Douglas, I can no longer serve in your Government. I shall send my formal letter of resignation in the morning.'

Hartwall contemplated him for several seconds before responding, 'I hope you won't, Maddison. But if you do, of course, I shall accept with regret. I hope you'll sleep on it. Palfrey—' he turned to face Palfrey squarely'—the newspapers will be after you in earnest, now. Do you need any help? Or any further protection?'

'I think I can cope,' Palfrey assured him. 'As for danger, presumably now that the story has been released, I'll be left alone for a while.'

He smiled. The Prime Minister held out a hand, gripped his firmly, and said, 'Good night. Keep me in closest touch.'

Palfrey went out, leaving the two politicians together. A footman opened the front door for him. Policemen stood like a barricade across the front of No. 10, and a big crowd gathered in the narrow street and a larger one in Whitehall. Immediately Palfrey appeared flash bulbs lit up the scene and half-blinded him, television cameras whirred, men and women began to hurl questions. Palfrey realised it would be impossible to get through without making a statement and answering some questions, and he might as well get the interrogation over.

So he stood with his back to the door of No. 10 and began to talk.

Nearly two hundred miles away, almost at that same instant, the girl whom Maddern knew as Susan or Sue, also began to talk. She had been unconscious or asleep until an hour ago. Mrs. Witherspoon had taken her to the bathroom and then prepared a light meal, a plain omelette, fruit salad

and cream with cheese and cracker biscuits. Now, Maddern sat opposite the girl as they drank coffee. He had not sent for Congleton the psychiatrist because he thought that two strange men might make her nervous and even more difficult to cope with.

It was hard to believe she had been so violent, so vicious.

She was rested and looked unbelievably lovely – doll-like. Her features were so perfect and her skin so free from blemish that it was virtually impossible to believe that she was real. Her eyes, violet in colour, were fringed by sweeping dark lashes; the outline of her lips, her nose, her eyebrows was like the work of a master, achieving perfection.

Her shoulders, so square; her bosom, young and provocative; her waist, tiny and merging into hips that were much more than boyish. And her dress *was* like a skin, even where it fitted loosely. He had never seen such delicate material. She sat in a big armchair – or rather, a chair which was made to look big by her tiny, elfin figure – —the fragility of her head enhanced by a background of centuries-old oak beams.

She sipped the coffee while looking at him. If he had to use a single word to describe her attitude then, it would be 'demure'.

'Well,' he said at last, 'do you really feel better?'

'Oh, much, thank you. Much better.'

'I'm very glad. Did you seriously try to kill the man in my garden?' he went on.

'Oh, yes,' she answered, without hesitation.

'Why?'

'Because he was working for Dr. Palfrey.'

'Is that a very good reason?' Maddern spoke as if he were humouring a small child.

'Yes,' she answered simply.

'Why?'

'Palfrey is our enemy.'

'Our', Maddern noticed with sharp interest: it was the first time she had even implied that she was not working alone.

'Must you kill your enemies?' Maddern enquired quite casually.

'Yes. Yes, of course.'

'You don't believe in forgiveness, then?'

She frowned, as if genuinely puzzled, and then asked as if she really could not understand the question, 'No. Why should I?'

'It's a common Christian principle,' he stated, almost too lightly. He did not want to frighten her but he so wanted to learn a great deal about her. If he didn't he would feel that he was letting Palfrey down.

'A common what?' she asked.

'A common Christian principle,' he repeated.

'What is a Christian principle?'

Now, he was both deeply worried and amazed: she could be fooling him, of course, pretending that she didn't know, but on the other hand she might be truly ignorant – a girl who had been brought up without any knowledge

of Christianity at all.

'It's a principle based on the preaching of Christ,' he explained.

If she asked, 'Who is Christ?' he thought he would not know what to do next. And she was puzzled by the name as if she really didn't know what and who Christ was. Then the look of utter bafflement on her face faded, and understanding dawned. Maddern began to breathe more freely.

'Oh, Jesus Christ, you mean.'

'Yes, that's right.'

'But he was one of the false prophets,' argued Susan, very clearly, 'wasn't he?'

Now, Maddern almost stopped breathing, and when she realised that he wasn't going on, she said, 'Like Mohammed and Buddha and Confucius and —oh, I forget.'

'Who told you they were false prophets?' asked Maddern, huskily.

'Well, everyone knows.'

'They all founded great religions,' he told her.

'Yes, I know. But surely nobody believes in religion anymore.'

He could hear such a claim from a dozen, a hundred young people whom he knew: children he had brought into the world as he had brought Jane Gunnison's baby, without being so affected and finding it so bizarre. She talked as if she had been brought up without belief in any of the religions; to know of them only as an historic concept with no influence at all on the world of today. Yet their influence, in many ways, was as great as ever. There was a revolt against organised religion but even in the Christian churches which had lost much support there remained a hard core of believers. Didn't this girl know that? Could she have been so cloistered as to be truly ignorant?

He knew that it would be no use to argue with her; he had to lead away from the subject in the hope of learning more about her. Who she was, where she came from, why Palfrey was an enemy, how she had come to believe that enemies should be killed.

'So, you wanted to kill Palfrey,' he said.

'Yes, of course.'

'Why had he become your enemy?'

She looked puzzled again as she answered, 'He tried to stop me going home.'

'Home?' echoed Maddern, with sharp interest.

Her expression changed, and there was cunning in it. She hesitated for a long time and then said, 'I am not allowed to tell you where I come from. This Dr. Palfrey tried to find out.' She said that as if it were explanation enough for wanting him dead.

'Did he do you any harm, as a person?' Maddern asked.

'Oh, no. He—' She broke off, frowning, and left her sentence in mid-air.

'He's just an enemy, is that it?' Maddern asked lamely.

'Yes.' She placed her hands on the arms of her chair and raised her eyebrows as she looked at him. She was so tiny that her toes did not touch

the floor. ‘Just an enemy.’

‘Of your country? Your—of your leader, perhaps?’

‘Oh, yes,’ she said. ‘Of my leader.’

‘Who is—’

Before he could finish the question she catapulted at him from the chair. One moment she was sitting there relaxed and demure-looking, if puzzled, the next she was hurtling towards him like a bullet. His coffee cup and saucer went flying in one direction, the spoon brushed his forehead. He dodged to one side, but could not evade her – not her body, nor her hands as she clawed at him, nor her feet as she kicked. She was in a vicious fury, at him tooth and nail.

Then, she sprang back, turned and rushed towards the door.

Maddern, blood welling up from a scratch on his cheek, eyes watering where she had poked them, legs wet from his own spilled coffee, tried to get up quickly to follow her, but some strange force, like a great pressure of air, pushed at him, and he dropped back into the chair. Before he was properly on his feet, she had disappeared into the hall.

The sensation of being thrust back, had gone with her.

Chapter Ten

HELLION

Maddern, half dazed, blood now streaming down his cheek, ran to the door and out into the garden. It was nearly dark, but a full moon brightened heaven and Earth and made the stars look close. No one but Susan was in sight, a slim, fast-moving figure soon lost against the darkness of trees, then suddenly vivid against the paleness of the drive and the western sky. He was already gasping for breath, raging with himself because he was so out of condition and had been taken by surprise, raging at the fact that the C.I.D. men weren't there. My God! No wonder things went so badly wrong if men slept on such a job as this. Or else were out, drinking.

Then, the headlights of a car shone out, vivid yellow. Susan looked almost like a rabbit, caught running. She stopped. She raised her hands, the headlight beams showed her slender figure, shone on her face and poured brilliance into her eyes.

A car pulled out at the end of the drive, and men stepped from this. One of them called, 'Give up, Sue.'

She didn't move.

'You'll only get hurt if you move.'

Men began to close in on her from all sides, from the cars and the trees. There were six in all, and each approached warily. Six, against a girl who hardly came up to their shoulders! They approached a step at a time, while she stood there, staring at each man in turn.

Then, she spun about and rushed back towards Maddern.

This was the second time she had taken him unawares, but now he had a little warning. He became aware of other men on either side but not yet close and obviously not visible to the girl. She did not dodge either right or left but came hurtling towards him. If she came at him full pelt, and struck him, could he stand up? He crouched, heart hammering. Now he could see her face and her eyes against what light there was; she was still quite beautiful.

Maddern held his breath, as he waited. Surely she would dodge, would not continue on this collision course. He braced himself and, from about ten feet away, she leapt. He was surprised how high she could jump, the sharp toes of her shoes on a level with his eyes.

She was going to kick him in the face!

Suddenly, the other men moved, swiftly, while Maddern tucked his head well down on his chest and spread his arms to catch her. At that instant, her hard body struck his like a battering ram, and he *was* bowled over, but somehow he kept his arms about her; his fingers seemed to be self-locking behind her back. She began to writhe and kick, bending her arms as she tried to drive her elbows into his face. Her fist caught him in the forehead

and pain shrieked through him.

He still held her, tight, but it was like trying to hold a huge cat, her claws were everywhere, on his clothes and on his skin. She seemed to be electrically ablaze, working as if her very life depended on it, and in a way it did.

He hugged her tighter and tighter.

She began to breathe more sluggishly, almost gasping for breath. His grip hardened. He was aware only of her, but on the perimeter of his vision were several men, the C.I.D. men of course. They were in a circle. *Why* didn't they *help*? There were plenty of them, why—

He broke off, for she went suddenly inert, collapsing against him.

'Be careful,' Smith called. 'She pulled this one before.'

'*>Mind she doesn't cut and run for it*!' one of the men called out.

'She won't—' began Maddern. 'She—'

She arched her back like a bucking horse and began to kick and to scream again. Men came to try to stop her but she was in an absolute fury, writhing and kicking with astonishing strength. Maddern put his hands round her neck and began to squeeze as a man called out, 'Don't hurt her!'

'Hurt—'

'Don't break her neck.' This time it was Smith, who had worked so hard to steady her.

'I'd like to choke the life out of her,' Maddern growled.

'That's what we're afraid of,' Smith remarked.

Then Susan, lying so limp and looking so fragile, suddenly bounded upwards, freed herself, struck Maddern on the stomach with her heel, landed, and began to race towards the drive gates again. This time two men stepped in her path and grabbed her. She seemed too exhausted to scream or struggle any more. One of the men held her limp figure, the other began to put his own jacket on her, back to front. He tied the sleeves round her breast with a vigorous pull, but did not let her go.

'Got her,' one of the men called, breathing heavily.

'Watch her!'

'She's the only one we've got,' a man explained with a curious laugh.

'Do we want more like her?' asked a third.

'Whatever you do, don't let her go.'

'Where are we going to take her?' called a man who hadn't spoken before.

'Back to my house,' said Maddern, brusquely. 'I won't let her go again, and you could watch the doors instead of being out among the trees.'

'Teach grandma,' said one.

'To suck eggs,' called a third.

'If you'll stop playing the fool we'll take her to my surgery,' Maddern said harshly. 'Let's get a move on.'

She lay like a doll on the couch of his surgery, as far as Maddern could judge, completely unharmed. Her pulse was a little fast, but that was hardly surprising. She lay absolutely still, on her back, and in this bright electric

light, looked ethereally beautiful. She wasn't as lovely as when he had first seen her, but when one considered where she had been and what she had done, she was incredible. The material of her dress was soft, much softer than silk, and there seemed to be no seams.

Two men, including Smith, were in the surgery with him.

'Dr. Maddern,' Smith said, quietly.

'Yes?'

'We simply must not lose that girl. She is the only contact we've ever had with this particular enemy. She might well become an emissary or an interpreter and guide. When you put your fingers round her neck I thought you *were* going to strangle her. If we lose her, then we'll have to start again. Can't you make her talk?'

'Not yet,' said Maddern. 'At the moment we might have a better chance to find out what we want if we don't try force or pressure.'

'Leave her with you for the night, you mean?'

'Yes. And watch the doors and windows,' rejoined Maddern.

'If you think you can cope with that little hellion—' began Smith.

'Ever tried being friendly with her?' Maddern asked sharply.

'I'd rather try to be friendly with a viper,' Smith retorted, and he added sourly, 'Your efforts to be friendly didn't get you far, did they?'

Maddern looked into the other's tired eyes and bit back a tart retort. He could see that Smith was at the end of his tether. A battle of words would serve no purpose, and he needed this man's co-operation.

'It certainly hasn't yet,' he said. '*Is* her name Susan?'

'Childers called her Sue when she first tried to kill him with her pistol. And it stuck. At that time we thought she was just an extraordinary young woman, but it didn't take us long to find out that she's a she-devil. If you really want to see her at her worst, make a pass at her like one of our chaps did,' Smith went on. 'Then you'll see.'

'Do you know where she comes from?'

'No. Now and again she gives herself away as being on the other side, and anyone who tries to pump her is dubbed an enemy. She's the only one of the other side we've ever caught, but we've seen two others very like her. We captured her twice, and each time she got away. There are times when she seems to be made of india-rubber and others when she seems to be of high tensile steel.' Smith dropped his hands heavily against his thighs and went on, 'Oh, well. Do you have television?'

'Yes. It's in the living-room,' answered Maddern. 'Why?'

'It's news time,' answered Smith. 'For some outlandish reason news is twenty minutes later than London in this part of the world, and I nearly always miss it. I like to see the last news; it makes me feel I'm part of the world instead of a spectator to normal life. May I?'

'I'll join you,' Maddern said.

'Don't let Sue—'

'I'll see that our Susan's all right,' Maddern assured him.

He went into the surgery, where the girl had not stirred. He gave her an

injection of morphine which should keep her under only for about two hours, took the jacket off her and spread a blanket up to her chin, as he had once before. He was held in momentary thrall by her elfin beauty; in repose all sense of tension and fear and wildness was gone, and she looked like a child.

Was she a child? Sixteen, seventeen, say? Or a woman in her twenties?

Woman or child, she did not know much about the attitude towards religion in this country.

He pulled down a heavy blind at the window, which was barred because there were dangerous drugs in this room, checked that the door of the drug cupboard was locked, and went out, turning the key in the lock of the passage door. He must not be too long, he told himself, and turned towards the living-room.

Before he reached it, Smith bellowed wildly, '*Maddern. Come here!'*

Maddern quickened his step and then stopped on the threshold. The announcer was speaking almost phlegmatically and appeared to have no idea of the significance of what he was saying.

> —whole areas affecting tens of thousands of women, have become a human desert. There are no children on the way in any of these places. The women are barren or the men are sterile. If this process spreads then the future of the whole human race is at stake. In fact the human race could be dying out—

Smith slowly lowered himself to the arm of a chair, but Maddern stood absolutely still, horrified by the cold-blooded manner in which the story was being told, appalled that Palfrey should have released it in such a way.

> Secret investigations by Z5, the international organisation led by Dr. Stanislaus Alexander Palfrey—

'My God! They know that!' exploded Smith.

'Palfrey must be mad to put out a statement like that—' Maddern began.

'That's not Palfrey's statement. He'd appear himself if he could not persuade the Prime Minister to—' Smith's voice faded out.

> Dr. Palfrey himself has been the subject of several murderous assaults since his investigation began.

'I tell you that wasn't Palfrey's doing,' growled Smith. 'I'll bet he's so mad he could throw his hand in.' Smith suddenly laughed, only to choke on the sound; in a strained voice he went on, 'No. Not Palfrey. He would never throw his hand in. Even if he knew he hadn't a chance and they were going to hang, draw and quarter him, he wouldn't give in.' He swung round on Maddern. 'Find out where that venomous bitch comes from. Do you hear? If you want to help Palfrey, if you want to put an end to this horror, find out

where she came from, who she is, what she's after. Find out!' Smith almost bellowed. 'Do you hear?'

'All right, all right,' said Maddern, soothingly. 'I'll find out.' When such a man was on edge like this, when he could lose his self-control so easily, there was something badly wrong with him. It might be something simple. 'When did you last get a good night's sleep?' he asked.

'Sleep,' echoed Smith. 'Don't be funny. I haven't had any sleep worth calling sleep for five—no—six days. Just cat naps, now and again. And until we know what's going on and where that vixen came from, we'll never get any sleep.'

Maddern did the only thing which might help: gave Smith some brandy, and then called the others in, one at a time, to have a drink and so keep themselves awake. Each time he stepped outside, Maddern saw the lights of the Compton bungalow shining, bright now because the moon had gone and only the stars gave brightness.

'Oh, Guy!' gasped Belinda Compton, sobbing.

'It's all right, darling. It's all right.'

'But I blamed *you*!'

'Well, we know I'm not to blame now, don't we?'

Belinda made a sighing sound and snuggled closer to him. They were in bed together, with the television against the wall at the foot of the bed, a big colour set which seemed to make everybody on the screen life-like. Just now a young girl in a Scottish tartan dress was singing. Her hair was sandy-coloured and her eyes very pale grey.

After a few moments, Belinda murmured, 'Guy, I can't tell you how sorry I am.'

'Forget it, darling.' He squeezed her shoulders, nuzzled her cheek, and then said idly, 'You know now that I want a baby as much as you do, don't you?'

'Yes,' said Belinda, in a warm tone. 'Yes, I do.'

Then, she stiffened. He could feel her heart give a great leap and then beat faster and faster. He felt her turn her head to look at him. Her shoulder was pressing into his arm but he did not try to move. His thoughts darted to and fro as he tried to imagine what had upset her. She had been so very different since she had feared that she could not have a baby. Emotional, easy to anger, living with her in the last few months had been almost unbearable. She wasn't the Belinda he had married: she seemed a different person altogether.

Tautly, she said, 'Guy.'

'Yes, darling?'

'Supposing we can't ever have a baby.'

'But Belinda, darling—'

'It seems as if we can't ever have a baby. You heard what that man said. "The end of the human race. The end of—".'

'Forget him,' Guy Compton said sharply. 'Put him out of your mind.'

‘But he said—’

‘He didn’t know what he was talking about,’ Guy almost shouted.

‘But *you* believed him! You were as glad as I was when he said it affected everybody, so it wasn’t just *you.* But it includes you and me. Everyone. I can’t ever have a baby.’ She began to cry in a hopeless, dreary way. ‘It’s no use. It’s too late.’ And then she turned on him with sudden anger. ‘If you hadn’t said “wait”, if you’d done what I asked you to when we were first married, we’d have had two children by now.’

She caught her breath and held it and then cried in a voice of pure hatred, ‘It *is* your fault. I wanted children to bless our marriage and *you* wouldn’t have one. Don’t touch me. *Don’t touch me*! I’ll never forgive you for this, *never*.’

Nearby, among their neighbours, a young bride was looking in horror at her husband, and after a while, she said in tones of pain and disbelief, ‘We can’t have any children. Do you realise that, Hugh? We can’t have children, *ever*.’

Nothing her husband could say would reassure her.

She sat up in bed, lovely and full of life, pale, eyes touched with horror: the life-giver who could no longer give life.

Tears began to fall down her cheeks.

And there were tears and dismay and disbelief all over the land.

And there was worse: for now that the truth had been brutally told, there were doctors in small villages and small towns, in the hearts of great cities and the suburbs of great towns, who began to think, to realise that they had been called to very few mothers-to-be: the young and nervous with their first born, the weary who wanted to have done with children, the robust with a growing family who loved their families and who wanted more and more. The nation began to see, on that quiet night, began to realise the terrifying significance.

A new, a strange kind of fear clutched at the hearts of many.

A new, a strange kind of hope lifted the hearts of others.

It was as if the whole nation was stirring to awareness that it might not have long to live.

Chapter Eleven

TALK OF THE MASTER

Reginald Maddern sat looking at Susan, who had no other name he knew.

She was in the big, velvet-covered chair where she had been sitting over coffee. Her legs were tucked under her, her head was on one side. She was no longer asleep but she would not yet admit to being awake. Her eyes had remained shut as Maddern had lifted her off the surgery couch, ten minutes before. Carrying her, hugging her soft, relaxed body against his, he remembered what Smith had said about making a pass at her if he really wanted to make her mad.

If he were to do so now, even in play, she would wake up with a vengeance.

No, he told himself sharply. I've got to win her complete confidence, and that would be botched at the start if I behaved like a lecher. He grinned at himself, then concentrated on the problem, leaning back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. He knew, however, the moment the girl's eyes opened. Was she about to make another leap for safety? He closed his own eyes and breathed very heavily, as if he were going to sleep, and soon heard a rustle of movement at the chair.

He remembered her desire to kill.

He remembered how Smith and his men hated and feared her.

He remembered the tiny gun he had seen in her hand.

He remembered the invisible pressure, of force.

The rustling was repeated. He sensed she was very near. She hadn't run away, then, and wasn't creeping towards the door. Was she bending over him? He had a feeling that her eyes were very close to his, staring with great intensity.

Would she strike?

Part of his mind screamed out the need to spring away, to put himself beyond danger. The other part cautioned: *Wait.* Hovering somewhere between his conscious and his subconscious was the fact that if he could win her sympathy, could make her talk, then he might be able to help Palfrey and so find a way to overcome the terrible danger to mankind. If she killed him, he would be just one more victim, that was all: he would be little or no loss to anyone.

So, he kept his eyes closed and lay absolutely still. The way his head was bent back stretched his neck. One slash with a knife, one thrust to the jugular, and he would die.

Her breath touched his cheek – she was standing by the side of the chair, then, and leaning towards him. Now he could hear her breathing, above the thunderous beat of his own heart.

He let his eyelids flicker. Immediately, she moved. He yawned and put his

hand to his lips, then opened his eyes wider. Susan was back in her chair, legs dangling; and she was staring at him unblinking.

'Hallo,' he said. 'I must have dropped off.'

She settled back in her chair, tucking her legs beneath her.

'Dropped off?' She made the two words a question.

'Off to sleep.'

'Oh,' she said. 'Yes. You are very tired.'

'Very.'

'Perhaps you should go to bed.'

'Soon,' he said. 'Are you tired?'

'I am never tired,' she stated simply.

'You're very lucky.'

'Lucky? It is natural to me and as people should be. You people here—' she began in a scornful tone, only to break off, with a catch in her breath. She had nearly said too much, that was certain.

'Susan,' he asked. 'Where do you come from?'

'If you ask questions I shall refuse to talk to you at all,' she said severely.

'Oh, dear.' Maddern sounded crestfallen. 'I wouldn't like that.' He paused and then suggested brightly, 'Why don't you ask *me* questions?' He sat up more comfortably in his chair and then noticed some chocolate mints, which he always enjoyed after his evening meal, although constantly telling himself that they made him put on weight. He picked up the box and proffered it.

'What are they?' she asked, suspiciously.

'Chocolate mints.'

'They must be poisoned.' Her voice grew taut and she stared at the chocolates and then at him with a rebirth of the hostility which for a little while had been missing.

He chuckled.

'If they were, I would have been dead years ago.' He picked up a mint, popped it into his mouth, took another and then replaced the box. 'Susan, why are you suspicious of everybody?'

'Everybody is dangerous.'

'Do you think I am dangerous?'

She studied him, frowning, and then said, 'I do not wish to think so and I was not warned against you as an individual, but you are one of Palfrey's men.'

'Palfrey is a good man.'

'Palfrey is a *devil.'*

'Because he fights you and your masters?'

'It is enough.'

'Who are your masters, Susan?' asked Maddern.

'You are not to ask the questions, remember?'

'Oh, yes, I'm sorry.' Maddern finished his second chocolate mint, took a third, and was about to replace the box when he hesitated and held it towards her. 'Sure you won't change your mind?'

‘If you can eat them with impunity, perhaps I dare to taste.’ She took a mint and a bit off a tiny corner, very gingerly. As she began to roll it round her tongue he sensed her pleasure at the flavour. She ate a little more and more again.

‘Nice?’ enquired Maddern.

‘They have a pleasant taste, yes. What are they called, do you say?’

‘Mints—chocolate mints.’ He leaned back, finished the soft, melting mint and chocolate cream, and asked without a change of tone, ‘Why do you want to prevent women having babies, Susan?’

‘Ugh,’ she said, with an involuntary shudder. ‘It is like the animals.’

The disgust on her face and in her voice was so plain that he hesitated to push the questions any further. So he waited until she had finished the mint and tried to think. Her reaction to the thought of child-bearing accorded with Smith’s story of her dislike of having a pass made at her – disgust. And it also accorded with her brief bewilderment over the phrase ‘Christian principles’. It was almost as if she did come from another world, as if she believed herself to be immune from the laws of procreation.

The idea struck savagely at him, and for a few seconds he felt touched with fresh horror. Then, slowly, another question even more hideous came to his mind. He did not want to face it. There was something so bizarre, so unnatural about it that the words themselves seemed to refuse to form in his mind.

But at last they did.

Had she come from another world, one whose physical laws were entirely different from this one?

She was so lovely, ethereally lovely, but at times unreal to look at. The perfection of her body, of her skin, of her face, were unreal – certainly he had never seen anyone else remotely like her – she was flawless.

Was she human? Was she real?

He wanted to question her again but did not want to make her angry, and she was on the edge of anger now. He sought desperately for a phrase which would cause no offence and yet win a response, and suddenly he said, ‘So you regard us as animals?’

‘You *are* animals, although it has been made clear that in the upper echelons of culture and intellect some of you are in a much higher sphere than others—near the Bridge of Transition.’

‘From animal life to—your kind of life?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who told you that some of us were near the Bridge of Transition?’ asked Maddern, taking another mint so as to make the question seem more casual. Even now he would not be surprised if she flew into a rage because he was asking questions again, but she too was eyeing the mints, and she seemed to answer without thinking.

‘The Master.’

‘Oh. Will you have another mint?’

‘Yes, please.’ She took one eagerly this time and bit off nearly half.

‘So the Master sent you here,’ Maddern mused.

‘Yes,’ she confirmed.

‘It is very dangerous work you have to do,’ Maddern stated flatly. ‘Aren’t you ever afraid? Wouldn’t it have been better if the Master had sent a man?’

She frowned.

‘Why?’

‘The work is more a man’s work.’

‘It makes no difference,’ she said off-handedly. ‘Man or woman, all do the same work. You do not realise how far you are behind the full development of mankind. We have reached the Summit of Perfection, and now Dr. Palfrey and his agents would try to destroy the summit.’

‘If I know Palfrey,’ Maddern said, ‘he wants to build, not destroy.’

‘He serves only to destroy.’

‘You see the same things as he from different angles,’ Maddern argued, as if sadly. ‘He thinks *you* want to destroy.’

‘That is absurd!’

‘Is it?’ he asked, gingerly.

‘If you were not foolish you would know that it is absurd. We wish to change and improve, not to destroy.’

‘I see,’ said Maddern, and then he sank even further back in his chair and stifled an affected yawn, glanced at the mints but did not stretch out for one, and added almost under his breath, ‘it’s a pity I’m a fool.’

‘*You* are not a fool!’ she said, quite fiercely.

‘By your definition I am,’ he declared.

‘I do not understand,’ she said, crossly. But from the way in which she was looking, her eyes rounded and huge, he believed she did. So he kept silent, until she went on, ‘You agree with Palfrey? You think that we wish to destroy?’

‘Yes,’ stated Maddern, mildly.

‘Then you are a fool.’

‘I’m a human being,’ Maddern observed. ‘I think you have come to destroy in two ways. First, by killing—by violence. Many people died here in Middlecombe tonight, good men who hadn’t a chance to defend themselves. You or your Master slaughtered them.’

‘But they could have done untold harm!’

‘How?’ asked Maddern.

‘They could have told the humans what is being done. They could have enabled you and Palfrey and others to work against us. You could even have delayed our progress by years, perhaps decades. They had to be silenced. Palfrey has to be, also. And—’

She broke off, lips parted, eyes rounded even more but with their expression filled with fear. She shifted in the chair, and once actually closed her eyes, before Maddern completed the sentence for her.

‘And *I* have to be killed,’ he said.

She did not answer, but her expression told him 'Yes', and it also told him that she did not like to contemplate his death. He wondered what would happen if he told her that the news had already broken. There was at least a chance that she would fly into one of her rages, perhaps greater than ever because she would be blamed, having failed in the task that 'The Master' had sent her to do. She was so much more natural, he had broken down so much of her reserve, that he dreaded the thought of a recession which would undo all the good he had managed to do. She would learn the truth soon, but there was no need for it yet.

'Susan,' he began.

'Why do you call me Susan?'

'I don't know your real name.'

'My name is Azran,' she told him.

'Azran,' he repeated, slowly and as if with relish. 'I have never heard that name before. How is it spelt?'

'There is much that you have never heard before,' she retorted, crossly. 'A-Z-R-A-N. Azran.' The two a's were short and the name had a pleasing sound. 'We are not destructive, we are creative.'

'Thousands—perhaps many thousands—of women cannot have children because of what you are doing,' Maddern stated. 'They think it is a kind of murder, to prevent them from having children, if they wish.'

'They simply *breed*,' she said, acidly.

'Don't you?' he asked.

'Oh, you *are* a fool,' she breathed. 'You are an utter fool! If you would only see that we are able to reproduce people, perfect people, ageless people, people who live in their minds and their hearts more than their bodies. Oh, how the bodies sicken me!' She sprang up and for a split second he thought that she was going to fling herself at him, or else to run. Instead, she stood in front of him, striking an almost conspiratorial pose, and she cried, 'If you could see our world you would believe. You would *know*. You would see none of the deformed, the crippled, the mongols, the retarded, the people who are half alive. You would see no sickness, no agony in childbirth, no poverty, no hunger, no aged. You would see a Utopia. Do you understand, Utopia! Once you had seen it would you ever wish to come back to this decadent world you live in? To live here is like living among imbeciles—Now do you understand that to kill, here, simply preserves life on the Upper Slopes. *Do you* understand?'

'I might,' answered Maddern very gently, 'if I could come to the Upper Slopes and see the truth for myself.'

He uttered the phrase Upper Slopes quite rationally. He had no doubt at all that she came either from another world or from a part of this world so isolated and remote that none in the ordinary world had heard of it. It was a place where the bearing of children was considered repellent, where attitudes were vastly different from the world he lived in and where great power could be unleashed. He wondered whether Palfrey knew as much; if not, then, he, Maddern, had made a breakthrough which could be of vital

importance. He wanted to talk to Palfrey urgently, but the first priority was to reassure this girl.

Azran.

Not Susan – but Azran.

Chapter Twelve

INVITATION

Azran stretched out her hands towards Maddern in a kind of supplication. At least he had not enraged her this time. In fact he felt that he had sparked a new emotion in her – of affection. He sensed that his tactics had been right, that she had a great need for friendship and affection, but her expression as she looked at him convinced him that she distrusted her own feelings.

'Would you come to the Upper Slopes?' she asked soberly.

'Yes. Gladly.'

'You would not come to destroy?'

'I would come in peace, to seek your truth.'

'I wonder,' she began in a whisper. 'I wonder.'

'Whether the Master would permit this, you mean?'

'Yes,' she sighed. 'Yes.'

'You could ask him.'

'Will you permit me to?'

'How can I prevent you?'

She frowned, and, for the first time since they had begun to talk so intimately, suspicions of his good faith came back into her eyes.

'You are lying,' she stated flatly.

'I am telling the truth, as I see it,' Maddern insisted.

'You know I cannot now get away from here,' she complained.

After a moment, he understood. He relaxed, smiling faintly, stretching out his hands to her. Her expression eased slightly but she was not wholly reassured.

'And one must leave here to see the Master,' she declared.

'But can't you talk to him by telephone?' Maddern asked.

'It is quite impossible,' she said flatly. 'I must be at a certain place at a certain time, each forenoon, each afternoon, and at midnight every day. When I am there I can visit him.'

'I see,' said Maddern.

'But I must not be followed. I must not appear to be the victim of a subterfuge. Do you understand that?'

'Yes, of course,' replied Maddern. He glanced at his wrist-watch and affected a start of surprise. 'It's after twelve and too late tonight. I will have to consult Palfrey before leaving; if I don't he will have us followed.' He sprang up from his chair, showing much more vitality than he had had reason to hope. 'Will you stay here for the night? In my spare room?' When she didn't answer at once, he went on, 'You will have nothing to fear. I won't hurt you and no one else will come near you.'

Very slowly, she asked, 'Supposing Palfrey refuses you permission?'

'I don't think he will,' said Maddern. 'But if he does, then we're back to

square one, that is all.'

'You mean, back at the beginning?'

'Precisely.'

'Very well,' Azran replied quietly. 'But please do not attempt to follow the Master's messenger or to follow me. If you break faith then there is no hope of you coming.'

In her eyes there was great yearning for him to come. He had no doubt of this, and he was reminded of the time when he had been a student at Guy's, when the schoolgirl sister of one of his friends had fallen in love with him; calf-love, one called it, but with such simplicity and such purity. In spite of all she was and had done there was ingenuousness about this girl. And there was naivety, too; that was the word Palfrey had used about the Master. In this day and age even that tide was archaic *and* naive.

'I'll take you up to your room,' said Maddern.

As he guided her up the twisting oak staircase, with its polished handrail and panels carved with oak leaves and lions and unicorns, he wondered whether Palfrey would agree. What he had promised seemed the obvious thing to do. It offered contact where there was none, so it offered hope. He showed her to the small bedroom with its age-darkened beams, off-white plastered walls, and its chintzes, and then into the tiny bathroom, leading off, bath and basin and the splashbacks pretty in many-flowered tiles. He pointed to a handbell and made it ring and told her to ring it hard if she wanted any help.

Then he left her and went downstairs to call Palfrey.

'I can't be sure,' he said when Palfrey answered, 'but I might have discovered a great deal. Have you plenty of time?'

'All the time in the world,' Palfrey assured him. 'And everything you say will be put on record. Every detail, every word you can remember might be vital. Let me have it all.'

'All right,' Maddern promised.

Telling the story, Maddern relived every part of it. He could see the girl's face again showing its varied emotions, and his heart began to thump. Palfrey said little, his ejaculations, a series of 'ohs' and 'humphs' and 'ahs' being wholly noncommittal. Maddern controlled his voice well but inwardly began to resent the fact that Palfrey seemed so detached about all he was being told. He did not even comment when Maddern told him of his feeling that there was such naivety in the girl's attitude.

At last, Maddern finished, and asked brusquely, 'Well, what do you think?'

'The first thing I have to do is ask you a question,' Palfrey said. 'If you go to these Upper Slopes you know that you might never come back, don't you?' He paused. 'She may seem, she may *be* naive, but she has proved herself merciless, too. It is conceivable that she is tricking you – had you realised that?'

The question was like a heavy blow at the body. Maddern reeled under it, for the simple truth was that he had taken Azran at her word. Now who was

being naive? Slowly recovering, he answered gruffly, ‘I hadn’t thought about it.’

‘But you’re thinking about it now, no doubt,’ Palfrey remarked drily.

‘Yes,’ Maddern agreed. ‘I am thinking that you mean they could promise me safe conduct and simply laugh in my face as they cut my throat.’

‘They could, yes. They could also want you simply to send or bring me reports. It is probably about a fifty-fifty chance. You can’t possibly go until you understand that.’

‘I understand it well enough,’ Maddern said gruffly. ‘I still want to go, if —’

He broke off, reluctant to impose any condition yet knowing that he must. He was trying to phrase the condition and was coming to the conclusion that absolute bluntness was best when Palfrey said, ‘You want to be sure you’re not followed by me or my agents. That when you give your word no one else will break it for you.’

‘That’s it,’ Maddern said. ‘That’s exactly it.’

After a long pause, Palfrey said, ‘I think we ought to talk up here in London, Reggie. You’ll get a clear picture of what is going on, too. The simple answer is that I won’t follow in the literal sense. How soon can you be ready for a helicopter to pick you up?’

‘Ten minutes,’ answered Maddern. ‘Will you make sure Azran—called Susan—is not disturbed while I’m gone?’

‘Yes,’ promised Palfrey.

There were the tiny lights of villages, the brighter and more scattered ones of small towns. Here and there was a blaze of light indicating a city—Bristol and Bath, and later Salisbury, Newbury and Basingstoke. Before long a glow stretching out of sight appeared in the distance, night’s canopy over London. Maddern, sitting in the bulbous nose of an army helicopter, the roar of the engine deafening in spite of thick ear-muffs, watched with fascinated attention. As they drew nearer the canopy, red and green and white lights seemed to streak through it, and he recognised these as aircraft lights as the craft landed or took off from London Airport. There were the guide lights for the pilots too, at the control tower . . . Then those fell behind and the skyline of London showed, foreshortened but unmistakable. There was Big Ben, the whole of the Houses of Parliament, the lights on the curving, looping River Thames, on the bridges, the floodlights on St. Paul’s, on the Tower...

The young pilot, his elbow touching Maddern’s, said, ‘Nervous?’

‘Not at all.’

‘Well, you should be.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Maddern.

‘We’re being followed.’

’What?’

‘A small craft picked us up ten minutes ago and has been hovering near ever since. I keep seeing it against the glow over London. I’ve never seen

one like it before.'

The light from a low-powered bulb showed the lad's sharp features and glinted on his eyes. He was watching closely in a kind of driving mirror. Maddern, safety-belt firm round his waist, could not turn round fully, but he shifted his head towards the right.

'Hold tight,' the pilot urged. 'I'm going to drop sharply.' He gave Maddern just enough time to settle firmly in his seat then pushed the stick down. Maddern's knees seemed to come up to his chin, but there was no sharp contact. He caught a glimpse of a much smaller aircraft, more like a model of a sweep wing fighter, just at one side . . . then it appeared on the other side as the helicopter steadied on course.

'See it?' the pilot demanded.

'Yes. Could it be a flying saucer?' remarked Maddern.

The other snorted. 'A flying mystery, anyway! He's ten times as manoeuvrable as we are, we can't shake him off.'

Maddern looked down at the river, only a few hundred feet below. He saw a big, square landing-stage close by Big Ben on the Thames, with several men standing about, two of them semaphoring the pilot. Maddern's heart was thumping now; he had never been more afraid.

'Down we go,' the pilot said.

Then, without warning, flame shot out from the side of the small craft, and Maddern felt a heavy blow which made the helicopter shudder and the engine clatter. Quite suddenly the pilot yelled, '*Jump for it*!' Another word or two floated into Maddern's consciousness, which sounded like, 'Only chance!'

Suddenly, the bulbous nose was open and wind swept in. A red glow, lurid and flickering was all about them, and Maddern realised that they were on fire. The pilot held the controls as they dropped towards the river. The flames grew fiercer and brighter and now he could see them reflected in the Thames.

'Jump!' the pilot screamed.

Maddern opened his safety-belt, eased himself forward, looked over the side, and saw the water no more than fifty feet away. He scrambled to one side and the helicopter lurched. He balanced himself for a moment then jumped blindly, feet first.

It seemed an age and an agony of time before he reached the water, and when he touched the surface he went under like a stone. He heard a roaring, as if something had exploded and was being tossed in a dozen directions at once, but he kept his head, and he kept his mouth closed.

At last, he surfaced.

All about him were patches of burning oil, burning debris, pieces of the smashed helicopter. The whole surface of the river here seemed to be ablaze. There were boats – small boats. There were searchlights, beams coming from the landing-stage and others from the Embankment. He kept himself above water for a few seconds and went down again. He had visions of staying under. He gulped in water, and terror nearly unnerved him. He could just

see the red tinge on the river itself as he began to struggle. He clenched his teeth and told himself: keep still, keep still. The panic remained but he held his body rigid until his head bobbed above the surface again. He heard a voice, 'There he is!'

'Get him!'

Something clutched at his shoulder and there was a sharp pain in his arm.

'Got him!'

'Nice work.'

They were talking about him– two men in a small boat now only a few feet away from him. The clutching arm was a boat-hook, with which he was being drawn towards the boat. Soon, the men were grabbing his clothes and pulling him over the gunwale. They lowered him to the bottom, with a kind of rough gentleness and one said, 'He's all right.'

'Eyes are open.'

One of the two bent over him.

'Hallo, mate!'

'Want to be sick? No one's going to stop you.'

Maddern retched, and ridding himself of the oily, muddy water of the Thames did him a lot of good. Soon, he was sitting upright, rough grey blankets about his shoulders, tot of rum in a thick glass in his hand. He was shivering. As he quietened and began to feel better, he looked round and saw the wreckage of the burning helicopter slowly sinking. The oil patches were still burning, the searchlights focussed on the wreckage.

He muttered, 'The pilot.'

'What's that, mate?' asked the man who had pulled him out of the water.

'Where is the—pilot?'

'Not so lucky as you,' the man answered.

'You mean—' began Maddern, and then broke off. He did not need to know what the riverman said, for he realised that the young pilot had died. The youth had stuck to the controls until the very last moment, giving *him* a chance to live. *My God*! His life in return for a stranger's. He felt as if he could weep.

Soon, they had him at the landing-stage. Two men, one a Jamaican, judging from his black face and his gentle voice, took charge of him, helped him up the steps to the Embankment, where at least a hundred people crowded against the parapet, on tiptoe to take a peek at what was going on. Policemen, tall in their helmets, began to call out, 'Make way, please.'

'Move along.'

'*Make way, please*!'

At last Maddern was sitting back in a corner of a big car. The Jamaican was at the wheel, the other man sitting next to Maddern. Now and again Maddern shivered; it was more due to the pilot's sacrifice than to his own condition.

The other man was saying, 'Take it easy—I'm one of Doctor Palfrey's men —we both are. We'll get you into a change of clothes in no time—Palfrey's very anxious to see you, and someone was very anxious that he shouldn't—

Glad you had the luck—Like another snort of whisky or whatever poison they handed out?—Cigarette? —Right. We won't be long getting to Palfrey.'

Soon, they were slowing down to turn a corner.

'One little thing—don't let it bother you,' said the man, cheerfully. 'You'll need to wear these now.' He placed a large-lensed pair of sunglasses over Maddern's eyes, blocking out all but the brightest lights. They seemed to be at a hotel, certainly in a place with a busy foyer. The man led him thirty or forty yards and then added, 'Now we'll get into a lift—two short steps—*There* you are. There's just room for two.'

They seemed to be in the lift for an age, but at last it stopped and the Z5 agent slipped off the glasses so that Maddern was able to see. He was in a wide passage with tall glass windows on one side, a wall with doors at twenty feet intervals on the other. As Maddern's eyes grew accustomed to the light after the sunglasses, he was able to see everything clearly.

Beyond the glass walls was a huge Operations Room, with a control panel which looked as large as any used in the Space Control Rooms at Houston. A dozen men were at the controls, only here and there a woman. Red dots appeared on the control board time and time again, then vanished, then came back.

Suddenly, Maddern heard Palfrey's voice, just by his side.

'Each red dot represents a new area which we think is like yours in Middlecombe, Reggie. They're coming in so fast from all over the world that the Operations Room can hardly keep pace.' Palfrey paused. Maddern glanced up at his stern, bleak face as he went on in a brisker tone, 'Well, you need a change. Look after Dr. Maddern, Ron, will you?'

A youngish woman came up, very nice-looking, with a trim if rather full figure. She gave Maddern a smile and held out her hand.

'I'm Joyce Morgan,' she said. 'Let me show you where to go.'

She touched his hand, and Maddern felt as if an electric shock ran through him.

Chapter Thirteen

‘LET HER GO’

Palfrey, deeply preoccupied, desperately troubled, saw Joyce as she came up to Maddern, saw her momentary pause before, making an obvious effort, she held out her hand. And he saw the way Maddern started, saw the expression on his face change remarkably. It was as if all feeling had been drawn out of him in a kind of surprise at this encounter. He looked so bedraggled in his wet clothes, his hair plastered over his head, that there was nothing at all prepossessing about him.

Yet it was as if two people who had not seen each other for a long span of years had come face to face without the slightest warning.

‘Fifteen minutes, at most,’ Palfrey said.

‘All right,’ Joyce responded.

She took Maddern’s arm, as if to help him along.

Ron Wordsworth, the agent who had brought Maddern from the Thames, looked at Palfrey in startled surprise.

‘Not often Joyce is so pleased to see a fellow human being from the outer world!’ The moment the words were out Wordsworth looked embarrassed and apologetic. At first Palfrey did not understand why, but suddenly he understood. His mood relaxed, and he said lightly, ‘She doesn’t get out and about enough.’

‘You can say that again,’ agreed Wordsworth.

Palfrey went past the huge operations room towards his own apartment, on the same floor. Like Joyce, he spent a great deal of time here, hundreds of feet below the surface of the Earth, safe from all known forms of attack, and his apartment had every kind of facility, including a small kitchen where he could prepare a meal, or Joyce and he could prepare one and spend the evening together, watching a film, or listening to music which suited their mood of the moment, or reading. Most of the people who knew them assumed that Joyce was Palfrey’s mistress, and there was no doubt at all that she had for many years been deeply in love with him. Dedicated to him as well as dedicated to Z5, she spent practically all of her life down here, though even the best simulated above-ground conditions were not a substitute for the real thing.

Palfrey, on edge since the newscast, more and more on edge as reports came flashing in, sat back in a deep armchair in a room part office, part living-room. By day, one wall rolled back so that he appeared to be looking at a sunlit garden, or if he so wished, a wind and rainswept one, but at night there was the moon and the stars for company. Joyce had a smaller, similar apartment, nearby.

He felt less oppressed than he had all day, and believed this was largely due to the report from Maddern. He switched on the tape recorder and

listened again. Such phrases as 'the Upper Slopes' and 'the Summit of Perfection', the talk of 'perfect, ageless people who lived in their hearts and their minds more than in their bodies' were clear indications of another civilisation.

But where was it? In this world or beyond?

His brighter mood was also partly due to Joyce and the obvious lift of her heart. He thought again of the change in Joyce in the past few weeks – she was as attentive as ever but at times he suspected that she was trying to establish a new relationship – that she had given up hope of their living together and was seeing themselves more in terms of brother and sister.

He had *never* seen her face light up as it had when she had set eyes on Reggie Maddern.

There was a faint buzz and a green light showed in a panel by the side of his desk. He pressed a button on the side of the chair.

'Yes?'

'There are nineteen sheep station areas and two small towns, one in Queensland and one in Western Australia, where there are no reported pregnancies. One group of sheep stations is attended by the Flying Doctor service, and they have just been comparing notes.'

'I see,' Palfrey replied, gruffly. 'What is the grand total of affected areas?'

'One thousand and seventeen, sir, all rural, covering a total population of about three and a quarter million people,' the man reported.

One thousand and seventeen areas were affected. My God! The plague was everywhere.

Three quarters of a million women at least must be affected.

All his anxiety, his disquiet, his fears, came back until his mind was in turmoil.

One thousand and seventeen . . .

Joyce was a long time bringing Maddern in – perhaps fifteen minutes hadn't been long enough for him to have a bath and to get into a change of clothes. Palfrey, in this fresh mood of anxiety, veered his thoughts towards another aspect of the situation: the Press Release. Where had it come from? Obviously from someone who knew the truth, but not one of the Master's men; he had been desperately anxious to keep the facts secret. Palfrey had little doubt that they had been waiting until there was a *fait accompli*: a worldwide situation against which there could be no defence. As it was, over a period of a few months in a thousand and seventeen different parts of the world, no woman had conceived.

But not a single report suggested that there had been continence; there was not the slightest hint of impotence among the men in the areas affected, according to test cases checked by general medical practitioners. The sex life of husbands and wives appeared to have been normal.

Who had released that report?

Very few people had the knowledge, of course. But several had, in

Middlecombe – King, the Superintendent of Police, many of the council, Maddern.

Maddern . . .

Palfrey leaned over to a small, mobile filing cabinet and took out the file on Maddern. Since Palfrey had heard of the phenomenon he had had all the doctors screened, and although a few of them did not stand up well to the screening, Maddern did. He led a celibate life, too. Now and again he would go to the city and spend a few hours with a prostitute, but he had no regular association with any woman. His patients and his friends had implicit faith and trust in him. His hobbies were simple – reading, gardening, driving. He dabbled a little in archaeology but for the most part was dedicated to his work.

A flash thought passed through Palfrey's mind: dedicated, as Joyce was dedicated?

The thought faded.

Since the television broadcast, Palfrey had detailed agents and consulted the Special Branch of the C.I.D. to investigate the source of the leakage. Early reports had proved that it had not been sent out by the South West Press Agency but the Agency's paper had been used. That suggested someone in the Middlecombe area.

Maddern?

Or Simister? Or any one of the doctors who had been at that conference? How little had been known when he had first gone to Middlecombe!

He put Maddern's file aside, noticing that it had been prepared by Joyce, and pushed the cabinet away as there came a tap at the door. Joyce came in with Maddern, and Palfrey was startled. Maddern was dressed in a suit which could have been made for him, was freshly shaven, his rather rebellious hair was fluffy and attractive after the ducking.

'I lent him my hair-dryer,' Joyce explained lightly. 'I hope we haven't been too long.' She was flushed. Her grey eyes were very bright, and her pleasant features, unusually reserved in repose, were lit up by some inner fire he had never seen in her before. It was almost as if she were suddenly happy. *Happy*! Could they possibly know each other? Could strangers, meeting, have such an effect on one another? If she and Maddern were old friends, why hadn't she told him so?

Joyce and Maddern together . . . Good Lord! Joyce *Morgan* and Reginald *Maddern.* Oh, it was fanciful but there was a curious similarity of sound in the names.

All this passed through his mind as he said, 'Glad you took enough time—What will you have to drink, Reggie?—Are you sure—Coffee, then.'

'I've ordered some,' said Joyce.

'Good. Very good.' Palfrey was undoubtedly non-plussed by his own thoughts but he quickly disciplined himself. 'I've seen a report of the attack on the helicopter,' he went on. 'And on your flight. A small, rocket-shaped aircraft got on your tail just west of Bath and followed you all the way. The same aircraft attacked you and then went off in an almost vertical path at

very high speed.'

Maddern, sitting in a small armchair, said, 'You had me followed?'

'Of course.'

'Could the attack have been stopped?' Maddern demanded quite sharply.

'I don't see how it could,' Palfrey began.

Maddern, speaking with a new kind of authority, asked as sharply, 'You mean you wanted to have the other aircraft shadowed so much that you took a chance on it attacking the helicopter?'

'That's it,' admitted Palfrey.

'The pilot died,' stated Maddern, flatly.

They sat in silence for a few moments, and Palfrey had a strange feeling that Joyce had ranged herself with Maddern. Physically, she was closer to the other man and was watching him, Palfrey. *Could* there be a slightly hostile expression in her eyes? Could she be disapproving of what he had done?

She had often disagreed, over the years.

She had disagreed today, feeling that the truth should be told; had Maddern really believed that, too?

'Yes,' Palfrey said at last. 'The pilot was killed. You could have been, too. Every time I go outside this dungeon I am in acute danger. If one thinks in terms of the death of individuals in this business, one would go mad. We have a bigger, a much bigger problem on our hands than we dreamt, and we have to try to solve it. If we die in the attempt—' He shrugged, smiling faintly. He put his right hand to his hair, but withdrew it quickly. Sometimes he became acutely conscious of this mannerism and determined to check it, but he never succeeded in checking it for long. 'I asked you to come because I wanted you to know how far we've got. We've seen these capsules or rockets several times, now. Those we've captured have caught fire and been burnt right out. But reports keep coming in. I wanted to show you these headquarters to make you understand how fully we are equipped. To let you see and if necessary tell the Master about our strength and the fact that we now know that over a thousand areas are affected. Until you'd seen these headquarters you couldn't have talked with any authority to the Master.' He paused, only to go on, 'Has Joyce told you how widespread this is?'

'No,' interposed Joyce, quickly. 'Only that it's much worse than we'd thought.'

'Over a thousand places are affected,' Palfrey repeated. 'At the last count, one thousand and seventeen. And so far, there's not the slightest indication how the affected areas were selected or how the effect was confined within certain boundaries.'

He stopped.

Gradually, an expression akin to horror crept into Maddern's eyes. Joyce was startled but not shocked, but as the significance of Palfrey's words struck home, Maddern *was* shocked . . . appalled.

They were sitting silently when an elderly woman came in with coffee, chocolate and plain biscuits, cream and sugar. She put the tray on to a table

by Joyce's side and went out. Neither Joyce nor Maddern appeared to notice it.

Slowly, Maddern asked, 'Are they evenly distributed?'

'There have been none reported from Moscow or any of the iron curtain countries,' Palfrey answered. 'Otherwise, they are pretty evenly distributed.'

'So they—they can contaminate *any* area?' Maddern remarked huskily.

'Yes. Undoubtedly a point they will rub in when they start talking terms,' Palfrey said. 'Reggie, the rocket or capsule which followed you was the first one we've seen in flight. Once we knew what it was, we had to try to follow it, no matter what the risk.' When Maddern simply nodded, Palfrey went on, 'Will you tell me again what Azran said?'

After a pause, Maddern repeated the story virtually word for word. Palfrey, the words of the tape recorder fresh in his mind, knew that there was little more than difference of emphasis and of phrase in the recital. Maddern didn't repeat it as if he had learned the words off by heart; just as if it were recollection.

'And you think we should let Azran go,' Palfrey said.

'Sap, it goes without saying,' interpolated Joyce.

'I certainly do,' replied Maddern.

'And you don't think she should be followed?'

'I feel even more sure of that, after the helicopter incident,' answered Maddern. 'Whoever followed would be observed. It would be a waste of time to try to prevent that. Whereas if Azran could talk to the man called the Master she might persuade him that everyone working against him isn't necessarily a mortal enemy. And if she could persuade him to let *me* go to see him—'

'Would you still go?'

'Of course I would!'

'Not forgetting what little chance there would be of coming back?'

'You should know that wouldn't affect me,' said Maddern, irritably. 'Palfrey, the main question is whether you will let Azran go without having her followed. I don't want to hear all that nonsense about a great responsibility to mankind. Any word given under pressure can be broken at will. I—' He broke off, as if searching for a phrase, and then clapped his hands together with a loud sound as he went on, 'I've a strong feeling that she's *honest.* That she has a sense of integrity as simple as a child's. That if I were to make her a promise, and broke it, she would never forgive me. And I've a feeling, also, that she's a friend.'

Then, he turned to Joyce and said one of the strangest things Palfrey had ever heard, and at this moment, totally unexpected.

'It's much the same as I feel with Joyce, here. I'd never met her until today, knew nothing about her, didn't know she existed, but I feel that I've known her all my life and can trust her absolutely. Nothing would make me let her down, nothing would persuade me to let Azran down. If I promised she wouldn't be followed but couldn't be sure because of you, I'd tell her so.'

He fell silent, but he was leaning forward in his chair, as if beseechingly.

And Joyce leaned forward, too.

'Let her go, Sap,' she urged. 'Let her go and don't have her followed.' When Palfrey did not immediately respond, she leaned forward and began to pour out coffee, matter of fact and yet very intent at the same time. 'She comes and goes in a kind of space craft which we can't follow no matter how we try. She may come in a rocket fired from the other side of the world, not from space, but we couldn't follow that, either. If you let the girl go and keep faith with her, there is some kind of chance. If you don't, there isn't.'

She handed Palfrey his coffee and added, 'Let her go, Sap. I beg you to.'

Chapter Fourteen

THE CLINIC

Palfrey thought: The simple truth is that the girl Azran is the only contact we have with the man she calls the Master, and if I let her go, we'll lose all contact. On the other hand if I keep her, I might throw away any possibility of coming to terms. And he thought: Talk of coming to terms is all very well but I doubt if the Master intends to – this has all the hallmarks of an ultimatum of such overwhelming force that we can't really reject it without disaster.

And letting Azran go *might* strengthen the slender thread of contact.

He studied the set faces in front of him, sensed a measure of condemnation in Joyce's – *in Joyce's* – and of despair in Maddern's, for Maddern did not expect to have his way. From the beginning of this affair Palfrey had faced a choice in which the wrong decision could lead to disaster and he was facing the ultimate choice now.

Abruptly, he said, 'We'll let her go.'

Maddern sprang to his feet in obvious relief. Joyce actually moved across and kissed Palfrey on the cheek. Another change came to her, swift as light, a mood of unmistakable excitement. The idea that these two knew each other returned, in spite of Joyce's explanation, and another thought followed, that whether they were old acquaintances or not, it would be a good thing for them to spend some time together.

'The quicker we start, the better,' Maddern enthused.

'It certainly will be. Joyce, why don't you go down to Middlecombe with him?' Palfrey suggested.

There was no doubt at all of the pleasure in her eyes or the deep satisfaction in Maddern's.

'I'll need twenty minutes to arrange the duty rota and to get a few things together,' Joyce said. 'I must fly!'

And she practically flew out of the room!

Palfrey and Maddern found themselves laughing. They did not sober until Palfrey took Maddern to the Operations Room, where reports were still coming in. Here, the full force of the danger struck savagely. The total number of areas now affected was one thousand and forty-one, and the places from which they came were shown with little redheaded pins on an enormous wall map. A small man with a big head brought a different report, 'No trace at all of the unidentified craft which destroyed the helicopter, sir.'

'I was afraid of that,' Palfrey said, and thought: Letting Maddern go really seems the only hope.

As they stood by the giant computer a card came out of one of the mouths; the operator who picked it up said, 'Kelepur, near Benares, India.' Then his voice sharpened. 'There's been some trouble there, sir. A family

planning clinic has been attacked and set on fire and the nurses in charge and all the staff have been killed.'

Lal Singh was an elderly doctor who had studied in Bombay under the British Raj. Even early in his life his experiences and his work harassed and troubled him and made him sick to the heart. For he lived, and brought up his small family, in the country town of Kelepur. In this almost exclusively Hindu area, the winters were blessedly cool, especially at night, but the summer heat was always to be dreaded.

What he most feared was the poverty, the near-famine, and the masses of children, many of whom were born to only a few years of gnawing hunger pains, each day their bony limbs and skeleton frames becoming thinner and thinner.

Kelepur was far, in miles, from any big city.

About a hundred miles to the north was the great city of Benares, on the sacred Ganges, where one might wash away sins and be blessed by the Gods, but where one could never heal the body. Few of the people of Kelepur had made the pilgrimage, but all longed to. The villagers sole diet was a little rice and some wheat, one scant meal a day, at most. They lived in tiny huts, not truly houses, in the shadow of the Palace of the Maharajah of Kelepur. There were several wells, each worked by men or boys and a donkey. There were sacred cows roaming the streets, there were Hindu Temples and a Buddhist shrine, and there was a market where everything the people needed could be bought or bartered for. The food, the gay cottons, the rare silks for the few wealthy, the alloy for their beautiful ornaments came from Benares, and the ebony for the local carvings came from Bengal.

And there were the carpets.

The Maharajah's Palace had been converted into a carpet factory, where most of the women wove the wool and the goats' hair and the cotton fibres into carpets of rare beauty and design. Kelepur carpets, once all hand woven, were now made partly on old-fashioned machines from Birmingham, in England, and from Russia. So there was some wealth, some trade in the district, for the sheep and the goats were reared locally, and a local cotton crop was used increasingly for clothing and sheeting for export to the West.

But for one thing, Kelepur could have been quite wealthy; certainly there would have been little poverty but for that one thing – the children.

They spawned, it seemed, as the minutes passed. Always babies and more babies and more babies still. The women who bore the children grew old in a generation. Their looks failed them and their flesh and their wombs wasted away. As soon as they could serve any purpose their children worked – at cotton picking, at wool-gathering, in the oven-hot factories, or tending the sheep and the goats.

And they died.

Once, Lal Singh took a census of the children and checked how many were alive a year later to the day. Of every hundred, sixty-nine survived. There was the great ghat where all bodies were burned and it seemed that

the funeral pyre never really died. At times it was almost impossible to buy the wood with which to make the fire hot enough to burn the skeletal bodies.

The middle-aged and the old died too – often of starvation.

Many years ago, Lal Singh had said to himself, in tones of great despair, 'If only there were not the children. Not so many children.'

One summer day an American doctor with a team of social workers spent a few days in Kelepur, and for the first time, Lal Singh heard of contraception. It seemed to him one of the most wonderful discoveries ever made by man. He was asked if he would help to run a clinic to teach the people about birth control, and gladly he accepted. First, he had to learn himself. Next, he had to overcome his own and his women nurses' reluctance to discuss sex. Then he had to call a few men together and talk to them, while the nurses talked to the women.

Most of the women reacted in one way – with pure joy.

Most of the men reacted suspiciously.

But Lal Singh won support from the Maharajah and from some of the city leaders, until women began to come to the clinic and be fitted with the contraceptive which could work miracles and yet not disturb the men or deny them pleasure . . . and there was so very little pleasure in Kelepur.

Gradually the clinic became a rival to the temples as a place of culture, gossip and even worship. And gradually the birthrate began to go down. There were fewer to feed, and those who were fed lived longer and were in better health, so that they would work harder. Gradually, the town of Kelepur flourished, and was far better in nearly every way than any other district on its borders. There was more water for grass and the sheep grew plumper, their wool was finer; the goats were sleeker and their hair was longer. The cotton was stronger and the linens became of better quality. Lal Singh, delighted with the way things were going, began to talk to leaders of bordering constituencies, and they began to heed.

Moreover, the provincial government not only gave the clinic its blessing but actually provided a little in the way of funds. Even the government of All India, in Delhi, approved the project and provided help – not enough, but still help. Lal Singh, nearly seventy years old, was as happy as a man could be, and the people loved him.

They loved him, that was, until the day when the young wives no longer bore children.

Even at its best, the attempt at population control had been only partly successful; the birthrate was down but many young women had three or four children before they were twenty, and families of seven and eight were by no means rare. The clinic, which looked after the pre-natal needs of the mothers, began to nonce that fewer and fewer mothers-to-be came for help. At first this caused little comment, but before long some priests began to say that there was a curse upon the land.

What else but a curse had made the women barren?

And without children there would be no one to do the work or look after

the old, when their lives were near-spent.

A curse, the priests cried. The gods of their fathers had turned their faces upon the people and these faces would be turned away while the clinic of Lal Singh survived. Now, with all the deep-laid prejudices revealed again, the clinic was shunned.

The birthrate fell and fell, until at last there was no woman here with child.

And on that day a radio newscast from Benares told of the way the curse lay upon the world.

So, incited by a priest, the men and the youths took up their sticks and picked up stones and carried petrol and paraffin towards the clinic. The priest who organised the raid was very shrewd, and he had them link together in a cordon through which no one could escape.

Lal Singh first saw them when they were only a hundred yards away. He caught his breath as he stared out of the narrow window in the clinic made of wood and corrugated sheets. Then he turned and hurried to the wards, where there were still some babies and their mothers, and all the nurses. The women looked so old. Their hair was grey and straggly, the bone jutted out of their cheeks, their necks were scrawny and all their skin shiny.

He called out to them in desperation.

'You must go home! We are in trouble. Go, hide yourselves, do not come back to this place until you know that all is safe.'

They turned, gathered up their few possessions and hurried out of the back door towards the arid land between them and the town. Lal Singh drew his river-washed dhoti about him so that he could move more freely. He went out through the front door, and his sparse hair was stirred by a hot wind. Behind the leaders of the attackers were the people, hundreds of them, spread out in a long, limp line beneath the burning sun.

Lal Singh saw how far the line stretched and knew that the nurses and the patients would be attacked. He put his hands upwards in despairing appeal to the gods and to men, and as he did so the avengers of the children who had never been born began to run forward.

Lal Singh stood erect and still as an Old Testament prophet, until they fell upon him and beat him savagely about the head and face and shoulders and felled him to his knees and slew him.

Palfrey heard the story in detail as he came back from seeing Joyce and Maddern to the lift. It brought a strange, new feeling of hurt and of despair. Chance had made him meet Lai Singh, many years ago. Now the old were dying and there were fewer, so many fewer newborn. It felt lonely to be here without Joyce. He felt a stirring of an unfamiliar emotion and suddenly asked himself, 'Can I be jealous?'

As he passed the Observation Room, he saw a young girl operator glance round, notice him, and beckon. He went through, as the girl whispered, 'It's Mr. Stefan, sir. Stefan Andromovitch.'

'I'll take the call here,' Palfrey said, hurrying to a hood-covered

telephone. He had a mental picture of a giant of a man, his oldest friend, who was second in command of Z5. Andromovitch was stationed in Moscow and was as free from domination of the Kremlin, as he – Palfrey – was free from domination from Whitehall.

There was only a moment's delay, before Andromovitch said, 'Hallo, Sap. I am very glad I caught you in. How are you?'

After a long pause, Palfrey said, 'Horrified. And terrified. And baffled. Have you found some affected areas, too?'

'Yes,' Andromovitch answered soberly. 'Very many, I fear. Russia has, I am told, become aware of the situation and the authorities have been endeavouring to find out how the areas are contaminated.'

'Is there the slightest indication of how it's been done?' Palfrey asked, without much hope.

'No,' answered the Russian. 'The one unusual factor is that mystery aircraft, rockets or capsules, have been found in some places. Whenever they have been approached they've caught fire. So far no useful information has come from analysing the ashes. But at least we were not taken by surprise,' Andromovitch went on. 'A security blanket was put down at once, directly word came. Most of our commune authorities believed there were official experiments. No one reported and no one complained in case they were suspected of being anti-government.' He paused again, only to go on, 'More affected areas are being reported every few minutes! I have promised to talk with you and then see the Presidium. They hope you have some information, Sap.'

'It's painfully little,' Palfrey said.

'But there is some?' Andromovitch was obviously desperately anxious.

'I've sent Joyce to see what she can find out,' Palfrey said, with great care. 'I can't give details, but a doctor in Devon has made at second-hand, contact with a man who calls himself the Master. And we've had the same rocket-cum-capsule situation as you. It's just possible the doctor will give us a lead.'

'I shall report what you have told me,' promised Andromovitch. 'If there is any clue at all which we can help to follow up, be sure we will give it priority.' After a pause, he went on, 'I've never known the Soviet leaders so disturbed. They seem to realise that this could really be the end for humankind.'

'And it could be,' Palfrey insisted, feeling as if the very admission made him a lunatic.

'It *can't* be,' said Andromovitch in a strangled voice.

Palfrey said, 'Can you come over here?'

'I think I should stay in Moscow,' Andromovitch told him. 'Sap, could you come here, to Moscow?'

Startled, Palfrey said, 'Would it help?'

'It's a long time since you've been here,' Andromovitch reminded him. 'The Presidium does wonder if this is an Anglo-American move against Russia. You could help to reassure them.'

‘Stefan,’ Palfrey said, with sudden vigour, ‘if I get any news at all which might help, I’ll bring it myself if I’m physically able to.’

‘It will be a very wise move,’ Andromovitch assured him. ‘Sap—’ He broke off. ‘Oh, never mind.’

‘I’ll see you soon,’ Palfrey said, and replaced the receiver.

He went slowly back to his apartment, going over everything which Stefan had said in his mind. He knew that the other man was profoundly disturbed, that the government of Russia was as disturbed, and suspicious of this threat not simply to those who were alive, but to millions of the unborn.

And the only slender lead he had was Maddern’s.

Joyce Morgan and Reginald Maddern sat close together in a military helicopter large enough for four passengers. They were behind the pilot and heading towards the starlit sky. The lights below were far fewer than when they had started, and not so bright. Great patches were covered with dark mist, which gave an eerie, even a frightening aura. They sat close, on a bench seat, and after a long silence Maddern said, ‘I wonder if we’re being followed.’

‘I rather wish Sap’s men were following us,’ Joyce said. ‘How on Earth you—’ She broke off.

‘How on Earth I—what?’ asked Maddern, intrigued.

‘Can you come up again in a helicopter so soon after the crash,’ Joyce marvelled. ‘Aren’t you terrified?’

‘A bit edgy, perhaps,’ he said. ‘What about you?’

‘I’m a bit edgy, too,’ she said. ‘But I simply had to get away. I’ve been cooped up at H.Q. for so long I’ve almost forgotten what it’s like to be free. And please don’t blame Sap. He’s tried everything short of—everything short of throwing me out to make me take leave!’

‘Why didn’t you?’

‘Good question,’ she retorted. ‘Why don’t you take holidays when you can?’

He didn’t answer, either.

The light was very dim, the noise much less than in the other helicopter, and they were in a little world of their own. Maddern felt a curious sense of freedom; in spite of the dangers, he knew real lightness of heart, something he hadn’t known for a long time. He slid his arm round Joyce’s waist, and the sensation was much as Joyce’s had been when they had shaken hands, as if an electric current passed through him. He wondered – he hoped – she felt the same. She turned to look at him and in this light particularly, she was quite beautiful.

‘I don’t enjoy going away on my own,’ he stated, belatedly.

‘Nor do I’ said Joyce. ‘I always wanted to be where Sap was. I always felt there was only half of me alive when he was away. But—I don’t feel it now. I feel as if—’

She began to talk, and as she talked and Maddern listened intently, the pilot began to descend. He too was on edge, glad only that he hadn’t two

nervous passengers in the cabin with him.

For he knew that the helicopter was being followed by an unconventional plane, more rocket than aircraft, like the one that had already shot Maddern down once tonight.

Chapter Fifteen

THE MASTER

They sat even closer together, very tense, Maddern's arm firm about Joyce's waist. He was acutely aware of the softness of her breast against his fingers. There was fear, making his heart race, and there was this acute awareness of being next to a woman, making it race even faster. He did not know which was the main cause.

The pilot glanced round and mouthed, 'Hold tight.'

Mechanically, Maddern checked his safety-belt, then Joyce's. They were in a bank of clouds and going down very slowly indeed. *Clouds*? God! This was ground mist! There was a vague aura of light from which the shape of a lamp post loomed, a sudden swerve of the machine and they landed, with hardly a jar and with hardly a sound. All three sat in tension for a few moments, before the pilot pushed back the hinged door.

'I'll get out first,' he said brightly.

'Just where are we?'

'In your paddock, I hope,' the pilot replied.

They all laughed with that final release from tension. Then one after another they got out, and Maddern opened both his arms for Joyce to steady herself. For a moment, she was in his arms. As they separated, the pilot remarked, 'A bit close to your back door, sir.'

'A minor miracle that you made it at all,' praised Maddern.

The mist was thinner here and they could make out the shape of the light bulb over the porch at the back, and as they drew nearer, the shape of the old house loomed up, with the yellow glow at all the windows. What puzzled Maddern was the fact that no one was in sight; Smith and his men must be hiding. He had an uneasy feeling that they might be falling down on their job, but when he had suspected that before they had swiftly proved him wrong. Certainly they must have heard the roar of the helicopter.

As he opened the back door with a huge key kept on the porch rafter, he expected Smith to appear but no one loomed out of the mist. The light in a narrow passage, walls oak beamed like the rest of the house, shone through into the main hall. No one appeared, and there was utter silence.

'Azran is upstairs,' he said. 'I'll go up first.'

He broke off, and Joyce drew in a hissing breath for a man stepped out of the living-room, a stranger to them both – a man, yet one who came if not from another world, then another civilisation.

He was small, but had a remarkably boyish, clean-limbed figure.

He was dressed in a shiny, metallic-looking sheath suit of pale green, and a hood of the same material fell from the neck, leaving his well-shaped head clear; his hair was light brown in colour and cut short. His hands were uncovered, too. He had a tiny, pointed beard and moustache, and wax like

perfection of features and skin. He had appeared as if out of the floor itself, he moved so quickly. His very clear eyes had sharply defined but rather short eyebrows and lashes, in fact he looked like a man made up with extreme care to play a part in a space-age film.

Joyce's fingers tightened still more on Maddern's arm, as Maddern said sharply, 'What are you doing here?'

'I came to see Azran,' the man answered in very carefully enunciated English.

'Where are the guards?' Maddern demanded.

'I have dealt with them,' the man announced.

'How did you deal with them?' Maddern felt as aggressive as he sounded, but something else worked in him too, a new kind of fear. He had come here to try to communicate with Azran's friends, not antagonise them. Fear, concern, anxiety for Joyce, the woman he had met only a few hours ago, must not affect him. He must keep calm, reasonable, detached. Yet his heart raced. There was hardly time for these exhortations to flash through his mind before the other answered.

'You would not understand.'

Maddern could not stop himself from blurting out, 'I'll understand soon enough if you've killed them!'

'No, they have not been killed,' the other assured him. 'There is no need for killing now that the secret is known, and the world is beginning to react. Did *you* make that statement, Dr. Maddern?'

'I did not. I wanted it kept secret.'

'Then it was Palfrey.'

'No!' interjected Joyce, very confidently. 'It wasn't Dr. Palfrey. He wasn't sure what to do but was generally in favour of making an announcement. All the same, the one which was made took him completely by surprise.' Maddern felt the pressure on his arm tighten, felt her trembling, so it mattered a great deal to have Palfrey vindicated.

'Do you know who did release the statement?' the man demanded. 'Because on him there is a grave responsibility. Had this news been kept from the public—'

'You could have gone on until you had complete control everywhere, without any fear of being checked,' Maddern said. 'I didn't advocate silence for your sake, I wanted more time to think, more time to find out how widespread the barrenness is.'

The small man said coldly, 'I *have* complete control over that, complete control.'

Maddern opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again. There was something chillingly assured in the way the sheathed man made that claim; and at the same time there was the realisation that he said 'I *have* complete control.' If that were so, he *was* the Master. Here in Maddern's home, vulnerable as far as Maddern could see; arrogantly conscious of a superiority he probably didn't possess.

'I am the Master,' the small man stated simply. 'And I repeat that I have

complete control of the situation. I can control the future of mankind, Dr. Maddern, and in fact I am controlling it. I have only to give the word, and there will be no more human pregnancies; no human children after nine months from this day. Do you understand the gravity of the situation?'

Maddern said heavily, 'Yes.'

The master looked at Joyce.

'Does Dr. Palfrey?'

'Yes,' she answered. 'He hasn't any doubt at all.'

'Then we are in a position, perhaps, to talk,' the Master conceded.

He turned round very quickly, little more than a spin on his toes, and virtually flew into the other room. When the others went in he was standing by the fireplace, and Azran was sitting on a pouffe, a few feet away. Coffee was on a small table, with sugar and cream. Maddern saw Joyce glance round swiftly at the attractive room, then back at the man who so confidently called himself the Master.

It was ludicrous that he, Reginald Maddern, thought of this small person *as* the Master. The fear of being subordinated to this man's will was very strong, and although he steeled himself against it there was nothing at this moment that he could usefully say.

'Talk won't get us anywhere,' he said gruffly.

'Dr. Maddern, you are dealing with a situation completely new and foreign to you,' said the Master. 'Until you understand it, you can do nothing. And you cannot understand it until I have told you of it. Talk is the only thing at this stage which can get you anywhere. I am already where I want to be.'

Maddern took off his coat and flung it over a chair. Azran brought him coffee and some for Joyce as well. Joyce dropped into an easy chair. She was obviously as baffled as he and probably felt as weak – any moment he expected his legs to buckle under him, and he lowered himself carefully to the arm of Joyce's chair. There was some comfort in being so close to her. There was comfort, too, in his own nature – the gift he had of facing facts and never turning away from them. It was useless to fight against this man's present authority, better by far to try to use it.

'Where do you want to be?' he demanded.

'In complete control of the future of humankind,' the Master answered.

'Ah,' said Maddern drily. 'You are God.'

'So far as human beings are concerned, yes, I am God,' the Master said.

'What would happen if I were to keep God here, or take him up to London to see Palfrey?' asked Maddern.

'You could do no such thing,' the other retorted. 'For one thing I am wearing a protective suiting which would keep you and anyone else away from me. You cannot take me anywhere against my will. You could kill me but that would not help you. The *only* thing that can help you is talk, understanding and co-operation. Are you prepared to deny that?'

'When you say "you" presumably you are talking of human beings in general, not me personally,' said Maddern.

‘Yes. You—or Palfrey—or Miss Morgan—are representatives of the human race. Or, as I call them, terrestrial human beings. Palfrey, as far as I can judge, can speak for most nations if not all. No one else can speak for anyone but his own nation. Really,’ went on the Master almost petulantly, ‘the world is still in a state of anarchy. It is not substantially better than it was five hundred, even a thousand years ago. Let me tell you this: when you left Azran here, alone, I came to find out why. She convinced me that it would be worthwhile to discuss the situation with you and perhaps with Dr. Palfrey. She persuaded me that you are creatures of genuine intellectual stature, not simply emotional and animal morons. With intellectuals, I may be able to come to terms. However, I do not know whether you can speak for anyone but yourself, and I do not wish to discuss this twice. Is Palfrey prepared to come with you?’

‘Come where?’ asked Maddern quickly.

The Master looked at him with a scornful expression in his eyes.

‘You really do not know, do you?’

Joyce said, ‘Dr. Palfrey would go anywhere.’

‘Can you be sure?’

‘I’ve worked for him for nearly fifteen years,’ she stated. ‘I am sure he would come.’

‘Not knowing where?’

‘I wouldn’t be too sure that he doesn’t know where,’ Joyce said.

‘I cannot accept any kind of reservation or condition,’ the Master said flatly. ‘Either he will come or he will not. I will talk to him only when he comes.’

‘He will need to know why he is coming,’ reasoned Joyce.

‘He will find out exactly what I have done and why I am doing it,’ said the Master, with a touch of impatience in his voice. ‘And he has no other choice of action.’ When neither Joyce nor Maddern made any comment, he went on, ‘I will make one small concession, Dr. Maddern. I will tell you that I would take you all to a space satellite, one of those from which I conduct my operations. If Palfrey wishes to come I can arrange to have him picked up in London. He would have to do exactly what he is told, and so will you.’

‘I’ll talk to Palfrey,’ Maddern promised huskily and then looked round at Joyce. ‘Unless you would prefer to.’

‘I think this had better come from you,’ Joyce said.

‘What must he do for you to communicate with him?’ asked Maddern.

‘Go, alone, to Hyde Park, at the entrance to the underground garage, and then—’ The Master was very lucid and

very precise as he gave instructions.

Palfrey said into the telephone, ‘Yes, Reggie. I will do exactly what he says.’

‘And no attempt must be made to follow you,’ Maddern emphasised.

‘I can’t guarantee what others will do,’ said Palfrey. ‘I shall make no arrangements to be followed.’

‘Are you sure you remember the instructions?’

‘I have them here, taped as you gave them to me,’ said Palfrey. ‘He certainly knows his London!’ He gave a curious little laugh. ‘Just in case you think I am being too accommodating, let me tell you that reports of the number of affected areas in the world have now passed the one thousand five hundred mark. I don’t really have any choice, do I?’

There were other factors which robbed Palfrey of any choice. Messages were coming in from the governments of other nations, large and small, from all over the world. They were stunned as their peoples were stunned by the gradual ending of fresh human life. In their different ways they charged Palfrey with preventing this hideous thing which affected all human mankind; on him, because of what and who he was, rested this awful responsibility.

In the less sophisticated parts of the world, there were priests and there were witch doctors who all made the same charge – that the western doctors, those who had introduced contraception, had placed a curse upon all women, a curse which would not be lifted until those who had created it were dead.

The priests and the witch doctors were leading their followers – to kill.

And those who had been dedicated to their understanding of mankind’s greatest need – the control of population – were dying as Lal Singh had died.

‘How do we go?’ Maddern asked the Master, almost humbly.

‘Come with me,’ the other said. ‘Azran will take Miss Morgan.’

They went out into the garden where the mist had become much thicker. In a corner of the orchard where he had first seen Azran were two conical shell-like constructions which he realised at once were the rocket-capsules. They were like huge shell-cases and the fact that they stood enshrouded in mist gave them an eerie appearance.

‘These are our space capsules,’ the Master announced with a matter of factness which astounded Maddern. ‘They are self-propelled and need very little blast-off either from their satellite base or from the Earth. The rocket engines do not have to be thrown off in space. After each journey they can be refuelled, and if approached by anyone who does not use a control ray with which to open the door, they burn instantly. You should be informed that I have created a galaxy of these satellites which make no sound. In them I, and my colleagues, can land in silence and mix with the Terrestrials —the Earth people from which we sprang. Now! The inside of each capsule is completely pressurised, and you will be inside for a comparatively short time. We shall fly direct at over 10,000 miles an hour to the master planet, *Nega*.’ He touched a spot on the side of the first rocket, as Azran touched a spot on the other. Immediately, doors slid open, showing a pale yellow light inside. ‘Now,’ went on the Master, ‘you may come or go, as you wish.’

Maddern glanced at Joyce, who looked quite ethereally beautiful in the mist, and nodded.

They stepped inside.

Maddern had just room to sit on a hinged seat at one side. The master sat

next to him, and when he pressed another spot on the inside of the casing, the door slid to. Maddern found himself clenching his teeth. On one side was a small panel, with no more controls than on a small car. He pulled a lever, and there was a faint whirr of sound. Next moment there was a jolt, rather as if a lift had left its base, but Maddern felt nothing more.

He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again there was a kind of window

slot at his side, and he could see the stars; only the stars. Even though the stars must be so far away, they seemed to be moving very fast. The Master was sitting on his narrow seat, reading a small book. Soon, Maddern was lulled to drowsiness by the faint whirring and the passing stars, and he closed his eyes. He had no idea how long he had been asleep when he woke to a touch on his shoulder.

'Dr. Maddern—Dr. *Maddern*.'

It was the Master, leaning over him and shaking him. As he began to struggle up the other said, 'We are on Nega. Nega is our base from which we control all the satellites in our galaxy.'

Shakily and stupidly, Maddern got to his feet. The door was open, and he saw beyond to lighted passages and one big foyer, except that the gangway was very short. He stepped off it, on to the satellite, and at the same instant Joyce stepped from a door only a few feet away from him. The Master went ahead, taking all of this so much for granted that he gave an air of verisimilitude if not of reality. There was just room for Maddern and Joyce to walk side by side. Their hands touched.'*Is* it really a planet?' whispered Maddern.

'That was undoubtedly a space capsule,' Joyce said.

'I wonder where—' Maddern began, and then stopped abruptly for they reached an intersection of two passages, and Palfrey appeared from the other passage. He looked alert and eager and at sight of them, actually laughed.

'It isn't wholly a hoax, then,' he remarked. 'We're all here together.'

'Nothing about this confrontation is a hoax,' said the Master sharply. 'Please come in here.'

He led them into a big room with a curved wall, beautifully appointed in contemporary furniture and with many couches and easy chairs facing the wall as well as facing inwards. He motioned them to one of the long, curved couches, and as they sat down, the wall began to open. In fact, two sections of a huge window opened, and they looked out on the stars.

It was as if they were part of an unknown or unrecognisable galaxy.

The scene was of such beauty, such brilliance against the darkness of the sky. Slowly, a sphere floated into sight like an enormous moon and they became aware of the contours of the Earth and the outline of its western hemisphere.

There was a slight sensation, much as when the spacecraft had started off; then they were absolutely still, and the Earth seemed to fill the whole of space beyond the window.

‘Now do you see how easy it is to control the world?’ asked the Master. ‘Now do you see how small and insignificant it is when seen against the enormity of one galaxy in the universe?’

‘But in the beginning, surely,’ Palfrey said, ‘you came from there.’

Chapter Sixteen

THE CONCEPT

The Master did not answer Palfrey but he seemed to disapprove of the remark. He pressed a switch and the windows closed, then he touched the side of the couch so that it turned slowly on a pivot base and they were facing inwards. The Master stood up in one of those bewilderingly swift movements – he seemed to be in two places at once, they hardly saw him move. He sat in a chair opposite them, with Azran by his side, like an acolyte. No one else was in this room, and there were no sounds except a faint burring. The Master looked from one to the other very intently and then stated, 'I believe, above all, in evolution. Do you?' His glance darted from one to the other, demanding an answer.

'Yes,' Palfrey said plainly.

'Yes,' said Joyce, quietly.

'I don't know any alternative but stagnation and decay,' replied Maddern.

'Then so far we are in agreement and understand one another. There is a great difference, however, between your earthly concept of evolution and my celestial one. You believe that the whole human race will evolve, over thousands of years, to a form of perfection as conceived in the human mind. Is that so?'

'Roughly,' Palfrey said.

'There would be a lot of argument about what constitutes perfection,' remarked Joyce, with obvious feeling.

'But roughly, yes, I think you're right,' agreed Maddern.

He was fascinated by this man, by the realisation that they were here in space, had come here to the satellite as easily – more easily – than if they had got into a car from city to city in England, and by the fact that they were discussing a bizarre and in some ways inconceivable situation in such a dispassionate mood. The Master was obviously intent on making his attitude clear, and his enunciation was beautifully precise.

'Very good,' he said. 'Dr. Palfrey, it is true that this planet was colonised from the Earth, by a team of scientists who worked privately, financed by two wealthy men, both now dead. They did not agree with what was happening on Earth. They believed that the process could be greatly speeded up.' He paused long enough to allow that to sink in, then went on, 'You believe that evolution must come slowly, by trial and error, as it were. We, here, disagree with you. We believe that with careful breeding from a selection of male sperm and female ova, the perfect man and woman can be born. However, the terrestrial or what we now call the subhuman way to conceive children is by the physical union of male and female. This means that at the time of conception deep emotions are brought into play which adversely affect any child so conceived. Further, you still believe that the

child, once conceived, should remain in the female's womb. This means that in the nine months of gestation the child is under constant emotional pressure from the mother. Moreover, the child in the womb is subject to ailments which the mother might suffer. The simplest illustration is that Earth children can be blinded by mothers who have such a mild illness as German measles. So, we have the children in artificial but wholly satisfactory wombs, and, on full birth, place them under communal care. This has proved wholly effective here on Nega and on our satellites. The time has come, I am sure, to apply the same methods to the Earth. In fact—' He gave a haughty smile as he went on, 'We are about to colonise the Earth from here.'

And he sounded as if he meant exactly what he said.

Palfrey felt a shiver of horror through his body, but before he could speak, almost before he could think, the Master went on, 'If the world continues in your way, Dr. Palfrey, you would be doomed to failure in any case. The process will fail because you permit the animal instincts of the human being as known on Earth to become the focal point of the male and female relationship. This is why we call you the Terrestrial *homo sapiens* as distinct from those of us who stem from my family and those who first came to Nega. I call us the Celestial *homo sapiens,* because we live and work in the universe, among the planets. We are far superior in every respect, largely because we do not spend our natural energy in sexual activity. As I have told you we do not conceive in the way Terrestrial *homo sapiens* conceive. At intervals we have induced sexual orgasms, when under sedation, and we are not aware of the stimuli used. That is, a mild form of mechanical manipulation. The semen and ova so obtained are stored indefinitely and taken only when the female is at her prime—between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five. None of the false sentimentality and emotional stresses common on Earth is therefore extant. There are no known human blood relationships. Friendships are made intellectually, never emotionally.'

The Master paused and Palfrey watched unbelieving yet sure this man meant exactly what he said. Again the Master hardly gave them time to grasp the full implication of his words.

'You are perhaps aware of some of the most abominable aspects of the Terrestrial *homo sapiens.* I have to remind you that there is no process of selection – breeding is entirely haphazard. There is no truly effective system of training, either. Children are brought up in conditions of appalling ignorance and often squalor. The parent-child relationship is seldom, if ever, satisfactory. The dependence of one human being on others is, apart from its proven failure over many thousands of years, quite unethical. The Earth-child is brought up in an atmosphere of tradition which fills its mind with fallacies. Why, some people on Earth still believe in God! What a way to bring a child up!'

He looked and sounded appalled by the thought and oblivious of the irony that he should talk so.

Maddern said drily, 'A great number do.'

‘What possible hope is there for a child brought up in an atmosphere of superstitious hero-or-God-worship?’ demanded the Master. ‘What hope is there for a child who, from an early age, has to consider the emotional gravity pull, as one might say, from mother to father, sister to brother—oh, it is ludicrous. On Earth you have a gravitational pull towards the Earth’s core one moment and one towards, say, the north pole the next, or the south pole. Supposing these gravitational pulls were variable, not constant. People would have little or no control over their movements, over the more obvious physical inclinations of their bodies. Imagine such a situation—and then remind yourselves that this is the kind of multi-directional influence to which *all* children are born on Earth.’

He paused and this time it was Palfrey who commented, non-committally.

‘A great number of people advocate that the child should be separated from the parents early, so that bad parental influences are removed.’

‘A great number? Nonsense! It is doubtful whether there are a thousand psychiatrists on Earth who advocate this. Moreover there are countless other difficulties to be overcome before a child can even begin to develop—to *evolve*—into a rational being capable of using its intellectual capacity to the utmost.’

Maddern murmured, ‘There’s something in that. Wasn’t it Thoreau who said “Man’s capacities have never been measured, nor are we to judge of what he can do, by any—”’ He broke off, groping for lost words.

‘”—by any precedents, so little has been tried”,’ the Master finished for him, almost impatiently. ‘Yes. He, with a few others, have glimpsed the truth – that the potential of man’s mind has never been properly developed or allowed to *evolve.* Something always gets in the way of such evolution and mankind is thrown back into an era of primitive survival. Pestilence or wars or famines or—and most recent and most damaging—the production of far too many children because children come as a result of emotional urges leading to physical desire between the sexes. There is no chance for the evolution of a perfect race because of these and other restricting factors. No chance at all.’

‘Don’t you mean there wasn’t?’ asked Palfrey, quietly.

‘If that remark was intended to be sarcastic I trust it will be the last of its kind you make,’ rebuked the Master. ‘If it was an acceptance of simple fact, yes. By a process of simple selection, by using the sperm and ova of physically and mentally perfect men and women, by developing the system of the artificial womb, I have produced a race of people who have none of the defects of the Earth-bound human being. You see in Azran an example of such a person. Only in self-defence against Terrestrials do she and others use the quite exceptional physical strength they possess. We try to restrict the need for such excesses by giving to each one who visits Earth a small pistol which compresses air and is powerful enough to force human beings and even vehicles off balance. Show me yours,’ he ordered Azran.

He glanced at the girl with a kind of stern approval, and she smiled, as if quietly pleased, and took a small, flat object from her trousers pocket. It was

so flat that its shape had not been revealed, even by that 'skin'. The Master gave it to her back as he continued, 'We on Nega have many dependent satellites which are all controlled by us. We call the manmade galaxy Nega-plus. The Nega children, never influenced by any of the normal emotions, are taken to remote places on various planets and other dependent satellites and they are trained to use their *minds.* To *think,* not to *feel.* Their pleasures are all cultural. They study the fourth and even the fifth dimension. And there will soon be sufficient of them to populate the Earth efficiently.'

The Master stopped, and the silence was so profound that the faint buzzing was inaudible. It did not occur to any one of the three 'Earth' human beings with him to doubt the truth: there *were* enough of these children of the Nega galaxy to populate the Earth, even if not in the same way as the hundreds of millions of human beings already teeming there.

As if he understood this and accepted what was going through their minds, the Master went on, 'There are, of course, too many people on Earth. Replacement at the present rate of turnover would take far too long, even with the advantages I have outlined to you evolution would not be quick enough. Obviously, the best way to deal with this situation was first to restrict and then to prevent any new Terrestrial human births. I have been responsible for many experiments in such birth control, the last of which have proved to be wholly satisfactory. We have small dependent satellites, also controlled by Nega, the master satellite. Many Terrestrial humans call these flying saucers. These so-called saucers affect all the women of a selected area with the semen-neutraliser, which makes conception impossible. The whole of the selected area is potentially barren from the first waves of neutraliser, which we call *Nega* waves and which affect the ovaries and the creative or genital organs of both men and women. One such treatment is sufficient for at least a year. I have not yet sufficient *Nega* waves to cover the whole of any country but substantial areas of each country have now been affected. Moreover, problems in the production of the *Nega* waves have been overcome. The *Nega* waves are produced from electrical impulses common in outer space, it was simply a case of concentrating and controlling them. They are inexhaustible, like plankton of the oceans. Larger areas on Earth are being affected each day. There is no known form of protection. The waves pass through all known construction materials, such as steel, cement, brick, reinforced concrete, aluminium. Nothing yet discovered has resisted them.'

As Palfrey listened to all this his mouth seemed to become parched, painfully stiff and parched. He could not look away from the Master and had no idea what the other two were doing. There was a doom-like positiveness in what this creature said – obviously there was no likely margin for error – what he said was the simple truth.

Palfrey gulped and asked, 'How much of the Earth have you conditioned so far?'

'About one tenth of the major population areas and a far greater proportion of the scattered communities,' said the Master, promptly. 'The

effect will become apparent very soon, certainly within a month.'

'How—how long will it take to cover the whole Earth?' muttered Maddern.

'At most, another thirty days,' answered the Master. 'It is possible that it can be done in twenty days. I had intended to slow the process down—it had not been my intention to proceed at anything like such speed, because there were not enough trained Celestial humans to take over on the Earth. It is a living Earth we wish to see, not a dying one. This problem, as I have told you, has been overcome. Delay is not now possible. I had intended to come to terms with the big powers. However, since the announcement of the incidence of Nega-induced birth-control has been made, it would be an act of inhuman cruelty to slow the process.'

He stopped and Maddern spoke angrily and bitterly – the first sign of emotion he had shown.

'There would have been no news to break if you—'

'Reggie,' interrupted Palfrey in the mildest of voices, 'recrimination won't help. We still don't know what the Master proposes, and obviously it was a grave error to release the news.'

Maddern drew in his breath as if it hurt, but he made no retort. Joyce looked narrowly at Palfrey then closed her eyes. The Master gave a quick nod of approval and then went on briskly, 'You are a man of rare discernment, Dr. Palfrey. I am beginning to believe that it might be possible for us to come to some arrangement even now. Contrary to what others may think, it has never been my desire to wipe out all Terrestrial humans. Those who remain will have much more food and much more leisure as their number lessens. What I desire—' he hesitated, spread his hands and then leaned forward with an earnestness even he had not shown before '—are a number of places on Earth where my Celestial human beings can become acclimatised and learn what they will have to do when eventually we take over. They can, of course, do a great deal of preparatory work. In fact they will have to if they are to control the world in which the vast mass of people are old or ageing. The Terrestrials can, however, lead a contented life, surrounded by their normal pleasures, even their sensual pleasures. It would have been possible, of course, to make the men impotent and to take away the pleasures of physical love-making, but this I have no desire to do.

'What I do desire, Palfrey, is peaceful occupation of the Earth.

'I will guarantee that no harm is done, that there is no violence at all, and no blood-letting, in return for the free acceptance of, say, one Celestial human to every one hundred Terrestrials. They are to be absorbed in society and may procreate although they will be restricted to two offspring to each couple, and they will live in areas set aside especially for them.' The Master paused, then leaned forward and went on in great earnestness, 'I do not see how I could be more reasonable. Each nation may even retain its sovereignty over its Terrestrial subjects. I hope very much that the national leaders will accept the conditions, so that we may remove fear of extermination from the Earth.' Again he paused and again he leaned closer

to Palfrey, and this time he asked, 'Do *you* think the terms will be acceptable?'

Palfrey said quietly, 'I cannot tell until I've talked with world leaders.'

'Will you present these proposals to them exactly as I have presented them to you?'

'Yes,' Palfrey promised.

'Will you use all your influence to persuade them to accept?'

After a moment's pause, Palfrey said almost inaudibly, 'Yes.'

'But you can't!' cried Maddern, springing up from his seat. 'It's diabolical. You virtually condemn the whole human race to extinction and then persuade its surviving members to become slaves? It's monstrous. It *is* diabolical!' He glared at Palfrey, not at the Master, and his eyes were fiery and his lips taut; at times the words seemed to run into each other.

'Be quiet!' the Master ordered sharply.

'I won't be quiet. I won't—' Maddern advanced towards Palfrey, his fists clenched as if to attack him. 'And you are supposed to be able to speak for mankind. You can't even speak for me—or for you, can he, Joyce?' Now he began to round on Joyce, and repeated, 'Palfrey can't speak for you, can he?'

Palfrey and Joyce had worked together for over ten years. And, Palfrey knew, she had been in love with him for most of that time.

She had served him and Z5 more faithfully than anyone alive, with absolute and unquestioning loyalty. She had been known to argue, even to fight for her opinion but once the decision had been made, she had always accepted it, and bided by it.

Now, she hesitated.

Palfrey had never seen her wear such an expression, as if she were undergoing a swift transition from love, as it were, to hate. He had spoken for her a thousand times and she had never hesitated to trust him. But she did not seem to trust him now.

At last, she said, 'No, Sap. You can't speak for me.'

'My God!' exclaimed Maddern. 'Rather than let you go and plead with the governments, I'll kill you. *I'll kill you.*'

And he leapt at Palfrey's throat, hands outstretched and fingers curled as if to choke the life out of him.

For one moment Palfrey was afraid, for Maddern, even less than Joyce, could have no idea of what was in his mind. The next moment the urgent fear faded, for the Master simply stretched out a hand with one of the flat pistols in it, and pointed it at the enraged man's chest.

At that instant, Maddern collapsed.

Chapter Seventeen

THE METHOD

For a few seconds there was utter stillness, Palfrey and Joyce staring with horror at Maddern, who was on the floor, crumpled up, as if dead. Then Joyce flung herself on him, took his head in her arms, glared up at the Master and cried, 'If you've killed him, I'll kill *you*!'

She felt for Maddern's pulse and held it for a moment, now staring into his face. Then, pivoting round, she sprang up at the Master, and there was murder in her eyes.

Palfrey thrust himself forward, taking her by the shoulders. She struck out at him but he held her arms tightly. He had a strange flash of thought – that there had been times when she longed for him to hold her like this, and now all she did was strain to get away.

'Stop it, Joyce!' he ordered sharply.

She kicked at his shins.

'Stop it, or—'

The Master stepped forward and pointed the gun at her as he had at Maddern, and she went limp in Palfrey's arms. Her head lolled back, after one gulp her breathing seemed to stop. The Master, just behind her and in front of Palfrey, spoke with a touch of impatience.

'She will come round, and so will Maddern.' He watched as Palfrey lowered Joyce to a chair and made her comfortable, and then went on, 'The compressed air power here on Nega is much greater than on Earth, where it has a limited range and effect. That is why my emissaries have to learn to protect themselves in other ways.'

Palfrey made no comment as he knelt down on one knee and straightened Maddern's body, resisting the temptation to check his pulse. He left the man there and stood up to his full height. He was at least a head taller than the Master.

'I permit the use of violence only when there is no way of persuading Terrestrial humans to rely on their intelligence,' declared the Master, with angry impatience. 'It was necessary to send emissaries to observe what was happening on Earth, and they were sometimes compelled to go long distances from their capsules. Relief capsules were always sent, of course, but occasionally emissaries such as Azran were left to their own devices. For people who have had the best education, the best training and in one case years of experience with a man of your calibre, however, your agents are most disappointing. I am constantly faced with the fact that development of the Terrestrial human species by the simple form of evolution can only fail. Don't you think so?'

Palfrey drew a deep breath.'

'I'm beginning to.'

‘Ah. You *are* a man of unusual percipience.’

‘One thing is becoming glaringly obvious,’ Palfrey conceded slowly. ‘That you are very advanced compared with us on Earth. We need a thousand men and tens—hundreds—of millions of pounds to build a space craft. You—’

‘Our space capsules are quite simple. We have achieved what no other humans have been able to achieve – complete control of nuclear energy. Palfrey, if I return you to Earth will you tell the leaders of nations what I have said?’

‘I’ve already promised to,’ Palfrey said.

‘Will you use your influence to persuade them to make this arrangement with me?’

Palfrey’s hand strayed to his hair and he began to twist a few strands round his forefinger. He could say ‘yes’ of course, convincingly, but he was not sure that any kind of lie was wise with this man, who seemed able to divine the truth, to know what others were thinking. There was great simplicity, almost naivety about him, which showed in sharp contrast to his fantastic powers.

So Palfrey said, ‘I still prefer things as they are on Earth. Evolution down there may be slow, but—’

‘You cannot possibly win!’ cried the Master.

‘We might prefer to fight and lose,’ Palfrey retorted.

‘You have absolutely no chance at all. Surely *your* mind is good enough to enable you to comprehend the situation. Either the people of the world co-operate, and most of those now alive continue to live in comfort and freedom from fear in their own protectorates, one might say, while we take over control, *or* we simply take over whenever we wish without concern for them. We simply wait.’

‘Wait?’ exclaimed Palfrey.

‘Time is of little consequence here,’ declared the Master. ‘I may be impatient personally but if necessary I can wait for ten or even twenty years without distress. By that time the average age of Terrestrials will be so high that their leaders will come to terms. If they really prefer me to destroy them all and take over the Earth then I can do nothing more. I want to spare them, Palfrey. Don’t you understand? I really want to spare them.’

Palfrey said, ‘I’ve only known about this for a few days you know. *I* need time to adjust, to re-think the situation.’

‘That, of course, is understandable,’ conceded the Master. ‘And you will need help. Come with me.’ He stepped over Maddern’s body and went to the door which opened as he approached. He led the way along a circular passage, passing a few of the Celestials working at different control panels or scanning the stars. Door after door opened until finally Palfrey was at the top of a spiral staircase of bright metal. The Master led the way down.

As they neared the bottom, Palfrey stood quite still, for the Earth lay beneath them and seemed only a few hundred miles away, spanning the whole width of the window. A dozen men were standing at what looked like huge telescopes, and controlling their focus with obviously meticulous care.

Then he saw some tiny patches on the Earth's surface show a vivid white, as if light suddenly burned on it. The Master took Palfrey to one side of the window.

'Do you see the patches of light?'

'Yes.'

'They are new patches of the world which are being impregnated by the *Nega* waves,' the Master told him. 'This window is in fact a lens of a vast telescope. Each of the "telescopes" you see are actually ray guns. They focus on the illuminated areas for a specified period of time, which can be as little as three hours or as many as seven. After the radiation there will be no new Terrestrial human or animal conception on those areas.'

Palfrey could only nod, he was so appalled.

'The *Nega* waves can be strengthened,' the Master stated simply. 'At double strength they can destroy all human life. But as I say I do not wish to kill, nor do I wish to take over a planet which has ceased to function. But if I have to, I will, Palfrey. Nor would I wait very long because now you Terrestrials have reason to believe that we come from outer space and that we have satellites encircling the Earth, you will attempt to find us and attack us. You have some very powerful weapons.' Now the Master was looking only at Palfrey, and his voice took on a harder note. 'Well? Do you wish to save some who live on Earth? Or will you condemn them all?'

Very heavily, Palfrey said, 'I tell you I will put the situation to the leaders.'

'Good! And you will also show them the advantages?'

'I will present every side of the case.'

'Excellent!' approved the Master. 'You can go down to Earth at once, and —'

Palfrey said, 'With Joyce and Maddern?'

'Most certainly not,' said the Master, firmly.

'Why not?'

'You must surely have seen that neither is in any way amenable to reason. They would do everything in their power to prevent an arrangement. They must stay here.'

'Very well,' Palfrey said, after a long pause. Outwardly he had to appear to accept the situation, had somehow to hide his feelings, conceal the revulsion he felt against what this man was planning. What was happening at this moment over those areas which shone with such radiant light?

Then he added, 'But I must know everything, half the truth won't help.'

'You *do* know everything,' said the Master simply.

'I don't know how long the effect of *Nega* waves lasts on women. I don't know how long it will take you to impregnate all the people of the world. I don't know how long it would take to double the strength of the *Nega* waves and so kill everyone on Earth. I do not know the conditions in your conception, pregnancy and birth colonies. And I cannot urge the leaders to submit if I cannot tell them what will happen if they don't.'

He felt the intense gaze from the Master's grey eyes, and he wondered if

the other could read his thoughts, had any idea what was in his mind.

'I will tell you these things,' the Master promised. 'You are quite right – only when they know all the truth can the leaders decide. This Nega planet is manmade. It is our headquarters, as I have said, and main centre of operations. Other, smaller space stations comprise a galaxy, of which I am the supreme controller. The satellites can project *Nega* waves but the people living on them are governed and controlled from here. The speed of our attacks can be restricted only by the number of ray projectors in existence, and many hundreds are under construction. As I have told you, thirty days at the most, twenty days at the least, is what we require.' He gave a little smile, almost supercilious in its way, and went on, 'I trust you are not considering the possibility of finding something to counteract the effect of the *Nega* waves. I tell you with absolute truth, that there is none.'

There might not be, thought Palfrey. Probably, there was not. But he had learned one thing which the Master did not appear to realise. There was this simplicity and ingenuousness in this man who had such scorn for the people on Earth. There was no cunning. He appeared to believe that opposition was impracticable and in any case could be brushed aside. He did not even consider the possibility that Nega itself could be destroyed, and if that happened then the *Nega* waves could not be sent out from the satellites. If the Earth were left free from attack then in a year the effect of the rays would fade and life could become normal again.

As these thoughts passed through his mind, creating a fierce excitement, the Master touched him on the arm, and said quietly, 'As for our work, conception and pregnancy colonies, I shall permit you to see for yourself. There are colonies close by, and I shall escort you.'

To Palfrey, the next two hours were almost unbelievable.

The Master showed him workshops and factories where there was no noise, where only a few men clad in the metallic-looking sheath suits controlled computers. In some workshops the *Nega* ray projectors, like machine guns to look at, were manufactured; in others, furniture made of plastic, clothing, foodstuffs which had little bulk but, the Master said, luscious flavour to those who had acquired the taste.

Then, he was taken to what looked like a huge hospital, and in the rows of beds lay young women, sleeping or drugged, much like Azran to look at. From time to time an older woman approached one of those on the bed and inserted a small syringe into the vagina and pressed the plunger, as if this were a hypodermic needle. Clearly, the ova were being extracted, and the women did not stir. In other great wards, semen was extracted from the men. In other rooms again were batteries of balloon-like objects of different sizes, and a chill went through him when he realised these were the artificial wombs. Adjoining these were birth-chambers, which opened like the natural womb, for each child to be born, helped only by a nurse. The crying of these newly born infants seemed eerie, even grotesque.

There were also convalescent homes, where the young women nursed the

children, fed them from bottles and nurtured them. Other groups studied, went to the theatre, read books, played chess and cards. Then these groups were taken to departure centres.

'They will go from here to satellites,' the Master said. 'And some, like Azran, will be trained to supervise Terrestrial humans once you have shown the governments how inevitable our conquest is.'

On Earth, Belinda Compton was crying herself to sleep.

On Earth, hundreds of thousands of women were telling themselves that as they could no longer become mothers, their main purpose of living was gone.

On Earth, twenty-three clinics in main population centres from Chile to the Argentine, Mexico to India, and the Middle East to lands such as Laos and Cambodia, were destroyed because they were believed to have laid a curse upon the women.

'Palfrey,' said the Master.

'Yes?'

'Do not attempt to have this planet destroyed from the Earth.'

'I don't see how it could even be located,' Palfrey said.

'You know better than that. Some of your anti-missile defences, some of your own space probes, some of your space control centres, have a very great and accurate range. Don't do it, do you understand?'

'I can't promise what others will do,' Palfrey said. 'And I have to tell them the truth or they won't be sufficiently impressed.'

'Then tell them this, also,' said the Master. 'I need not wait even twenty or thirty days. I can add to the *Nega* waves bacteria which will be so contagious that once it affected one country the whole world would be affected in less than a week. You do fully understand, don't you?'

'I understand fully,' Palfrey said, his blood chilling. After a moment he went on, 'Does it matter to you where I land?'

'You have only to say where,' said the Master.

'Then I would like to go to Moscow,' Palfrey told him.

'Moscow,' murmured the Master. 'For any special purpose?'

"The second in command of Z5 is there.'

'Oh, I remember,' the other said. 'Stefan Andromovitch. Will you want him warned to expect you?'

'Please,' said Palfrey, almost humbly. 'Please.'

As he walked along the passages towards the launching pad, he thought with bitter irony of the strange fact that so much of his conversation with the Master was commonplace, even trite. It was so ordinary that it was almost possible to forget what he was going down on Earth to do.

Stefan Andromovitch stood in the Red Square, with the Tomb of Lenin and Stalin a few yards behind him, the onion spires of the Cathedral of St. Basil on his right. The great wall of the Kremlin was lined with troops who stood

at attention on either side of the tomb.

Red Square had been cleared of all civilians.

Barriers were at all the approaches, those from the hotels and the Museum on the south to the roads leading towards Gym, the great department store, on the west. The big cobbles of the square itself shone faintly in the first light of dawn.

With Andromovitch were two members of the Presidium, as well as officers of the secret police, the army and representatives of the Communist Party. Also with him were some of the scientists who planned the Russian space probes. A cordon of soldiers was formed about the square, and searchlights shining on the scene were still stronger than the light of dawn.

Inside the Kremlin, Andromovitch knew, were representatives from most European Governments as well as their ambassadors and consuls from far off lands who were already here. Across the world's skies presidents and leaders of nations were already flying, soon to congregate in one of the great halls of the Kremlin's many palaces.

No one knew exactly what to expect.

Aircraft circled the square, their engines roaring, and already spectators were gathering. For news of the powerful *Nega* waves had spread through Russia as if the air itself conveyed the story.

Television and film cameras were placed at various vantage spots in Red Square, on roofs and walls and at windows. Radio commentators and microphones were already in position.

The daylight slowly brightened.

Suddenly there was a curious wind-like sound, as of air rushing through trees. Then what might have been a rocket landed, base first, with no sound on contact. Retractable feet, spread wide to cushion the landing, gradually drew themselves into the base of the capsule, and there was stillness except in the breasts of men, who had been shaken out of their calm by the sudden apparition.

Soldiers moved towards the capsule but before they reached it the door opened and Palfrey stepped out.

He appeared so commonplace and ordinary that it was very much an anti-climax. His hair was awry, he looked as if he had slept in his rumpled clothes, and he might have stepped out of an armchair in his own home. There was no uniform, no space suit, nothing to betray the fact that he had travelled at least a quarter of a million miles since he had stepped into the space capsule.

He blinked about him, half-dazed, and it was some seconds before he espied Stefan Andromovitch. Andromovitch broke ranks and moved towards him with great strides. The cameras whirred or flashed, microphones were switched on, as the leader and the deputy leader of Z5 embraced in Red Square under those thousands of anxious, watching eyes. At last, they drew away from each other, and Stefan asked with quivering intensity, 'Have you really news, Sap?'

'Of a kind,' answered Palfrey.

‘Is there hope?’ The question seemed to force its way out.

Palfrey knew that Stefan must be under pressure to ask these questions at this moment, for nothing could be said until he had discussed the ultimatum with the leaders of nations. He saw pleading in Stefan’s eyes, a desperate plea for an answer.

He said crisply, ‘Hope for the living, yes. For the future, possibly.’

‘Are you sure?’ Stefan barked.

‘I’m quite sure,’ Palfrey declared. ‘Quite, quite sure.’

Question and answer swept round the world. There was hope for the living but much less hope for those unborn. On screens and from microphones the brief question and answer came, and then the world waited as Palfrey and Andromovitch were led towards the wide gates and went to join the assembly behind the Kremlin walls.

Chapter Eighteen

THE REPLY

The great assembly listened to Palfrey as he told them exactly what the Master had said, what he himself had seen and promised to do. He spoke from the stage of the New Kremlin Theatre, with the great chandeliers glistening above the heads of the people who sat in the auditorium, elbow to elbow. All colours and all races were together, there was no division of black or white, or East or West.

Palfrey had never known an assemblage so subdued, as if without hope. There had been many threats to the world, threats of great calamity, and even of extinction. Always when he had reported, there had been individuals who had shouted defiance.

'We will never give in.'

'We must fight back.'

'We must destroy them.'

But no such cries were made. There was a mood of utter defeatism when Palfrey had finished. From here and there came a subdued attempt to break through this.

'We must do something,' or, 'There must be something we can do.'

A woman, one of a dozen in an assemblage of over a thousand, said in a very clear voice, 'This is the first time I've ever known men acknowledge such need of women.'

Somewhere near by an elderly woman was crying, quite shamelessly. A man called out in a husky voice, 'It is beyond the imagination. No more children to be born into this world.'

'Palfrey,' a man called. He was South African or Rhodesian. 'Palfrey!'

'Yes?' Palfrey looked across at him.

'You've never sounded so absolutely hopeless before. Isn't there *any* way you can prevent this appalling disaster?'

'I can see none,' Palfrey answered flatly. 'I've explored every possible way and I think the Master's stranglehold is complete. I've considered every possibility, and I'm here to ask for suggestions from you.' When there was no response at all, he turned to Andromovitch. 'Have you any ideas, Stefan?'

The huge man shook his head with great sadness.

A man beside him spoke in Russian, and Stefan translated into English sentence by sentence. Everyone in the great theatre strained forward to look at the speaker and to hear Stefan.

'Is it not possible with all our resources to trace the satellite—Is this not an occasion when the Americans and ourselves should work together and destroy the satellite?—Would the Americans agree?'

A man called from the audience, 'We'd certainly go along with that. Anything is worth a try.'

Palfrey could not see who was speaking, but he had no doubt at all that the White House and the Kremlin would agree to work together – they had a common interest in the survival of the human race even if the day came when they tried to destroy each other.

A tremor of hope seemed to run through the assembly.

'If it could be traced—'

'Would our war-head missiles be trained on it—'

'Can it be traced?'

One of the men with Stefan, Cossokov, a vice-chairman of the Presidium, rapped on the table with his gavel.

'Please ask your questions to me,' he rebuked.

In a flash Palfrey's thoughts were taken back to the Council meeting at Middlecombe, to the West Country chairman in his heavy tweeds, calling for questions through the chair. That seemed to have happened a whole decade ago.

'I just want to know, *can* it be traced?' a man called.

A heavily-built man next to the chairman whispered in the other's ear, and all attention was soon riveted on him. Never had Palfrey known an audience so much on edge, switching its attention from one speaker to the next – as if they were watching the ball in a match at Wimbledon.

'Comrade Vassilov,' the chairman said.

'Gentlemen.' Vassilov had a gentle voice which would not have been heard but for the microphone in front of Cossokov. 'I can answer that question. Yes, this satellite could be traced. It could perhaps be destroyed. But from what Dr. Palfrey has said there is no way of being sure that it would not complete its task before this happened. Any satellite which can be controlled as this one would undoubtedly be able to take unusually effective evasive action. I have already a report on the capsule in which Dr. Palfrey travelled here. It is of greatly advanced design, we have no small capsules which are comparable. It can be used—it has already been used—as an offensive weapon, and it can almost certainly be used defensively also. The chances of our destroying this satellite before it destroys us are small. indeed, are negligible.'

There was a sudden, very noticeable change of mood, which showed in the tones of many voices, in eyes, on a hundred faces, as if suddenly hope had been reborn.

'If there is *any* chance—'

'We ought to try everything!'

'How long would you take—'

'Gentlemen,' interrupted the chairman with a heavy blow of his gavel. 'We must not all talk at once. Dr. Palfrey, you have perhaps something to say at this stage?'

'When the Master told me that he could add bacteria to the *Nega* waves which would quickly spread death over all the Earth, I believed him,' Palfrey said simply. 'I don't see how we can defeat the man who calls himself the Master.'

A man screamed, '*But there must be a way*!'

'There is a way for those of us who are alive to stay alive,' Palfrey stated. 'God knows I wish I hadn't got to say it but I don't see any alternative but capitulation.'

This time, no one spoke.

He knew what many were thinking. that with space probes, space stations on the way to the moon and every conceivable form of anti-warhead weapon available, there must be a way of locating and destroying the satellite *Nega.* There must be . . .

But could they find it in time?

In the satellite, Joyce Morgan and Reginald Maddern sat in front of a small television screen, watching and listening with their hearts in their mouths. They could see Palfrey and the others on the platform and through microphones plugged into their ears, could hear every word. Stefan's strong and handsome face showed vividly, so did the strength in Palfrey's, even though he had obviously no hope at all. They heard him say, '—I don't see any alternative but capitulation.' Maddern closed his eyes, and Joyce said in a husky voice, 'Oh, Sap, Sap, what's happened to you?'

Maddern said, 'Isn't he usually like this?'

'Like this? He's the most courageous man I know. He *never* gives up hope.'

Maddern glanced at her as if in surprise and then edged towards her. He spoke so low that she could hardly hear.

'Is he hopeless?'

'I don't understand you.'

'You've worked for him so long that you ought to know,' said Maddern, still in that low-pitched voice. 'Isn't he up to some little game of his own?'

Joyce didn't reply as she looked into his eyes, but after a while she said huskily, 'He could be. Yes, he could be.'

They fell silent, and the voices came again from the theatre in the Kremlin.

Palfrey was watching the assembly closely, wondering how many of these people had the faintest idea what the odds were. There was a kind of artificial vitality among everyone now, the Russian had lit the fires of hope, and everyone was adding fuel. Yet there was really only the one hope – that the planet could be destroyed from within. As it controlled the satellites, its destruction would be the end of the *Nega* galaxy.

If he could get back to Nega taking with him an explosive strong enough for complete destruction, then there was hope for the world. If the chance were one in a million, it had to be taken. In the meantime it was better to allow these delegates to talk, better that he should be pessimistic and urge surrender. This way he would be more likely to retain the Master's confidence, and without that strange man's trust, he could never go back.

There were Joyce and Maddern, of course, two precious lives which might have to be sacrificed, with his own, to save the lives of millions upon

millions. But there was no other choice.

He had to get back to Nega.

And he had to take with him something which could destroy the planet and everything in it.

A man in the audience stood up and called in a penetrating voice, 'We're getting nowhere, Mr. Chairman. We have now to decide what to do.'

'We can make no decisions,' retorted the chairman. 'We can only take recommendations back to our governments. Isn't that so, Dr. Palfrey?'

'Of course,' Palfrey agreed. 'I must return to London soon, each delegate to his own government. I hope all the official responses will be sent to me. I can't be sure but I believe that the man who calls himself the Master will allow us at least four days in which to decide.'

'Four *days*,' the man with the penetrating voice called out.

'Four days' echoed like a sigh about the theatre . . .

'Four days,' remarked the Master to Joyce and Maddern. 'Yes. It is reasonable. And it is reasonable that Dr. Palfrey should return to London, to collect the messages. I need to send Azran with a message, too – that any country which decided to defy me would be given no choice to live. It must be all or none. All or none,' he added and turned away.

When they were alone, Joyce said in a hopeless voice, 'How I hope you're right about Sap.'

'Don't you know him well enough to be sure?' asked Maddern.

'Not now,' she confessed. 'As I've told you, I think he's changed very much. Or—I've changed.' She placed her hands in Maddern's and went on, 'It's so strange, I can hardly believe it's true. Until a few weeks ago I was hopelessly in love with him. I was desperately hurt whenever he left me to come away, hurt that he did not feel the same way towards me as I did towards him. Life was all hurt. I knew that by working for him I was sublimating my love for him – that serving him was a way of living for him. And now I don't feel like that at all.'

'How do you feel?' asked Maddern, gently.

'Numbed, where Sap is concerned,' she said. 'For the first time ever I came to the conclusion that his tactics were wrong over this case, and I—'

She began to cry.

Maddern said gently, 'Don't cry, darling. Please don't cry.'

When she went on crying, he said in great distress, 'Joyce, don't upset yourself so. Sap isn't almighty. It's no crime to differ with him, and he would be the last to blame you.'

"Would he?' she whispered.

'Of course he would.'

'Reggie,' she said with an obvious effort, 'was he right?'

'About not telling the truth? Yes.'

'You're sure?'

'As far as I can be sure of anything,' Maddern answered.

'Oh, God,' she said. 'Oh, God. If only there was a way I could make up to

him. If only there was a way!'

Maddern put his arms round her and held her very close. Her shoulders, her body, was heaving as she tried to choke back sobs. After a while, he began to frown, and soon he was staring at the back of her head, at the dark hair so lightly touched with grey.

'Joyce,' he said slowly.

She muttered, 'Yes?'

'Joyce, did you release that Press statement?'

After a long time, she answered in an anguished voice, 'Yes. I slipped it in with others which had come to the Operations Room for vetting—we were keeping close surveillance on the South-West. I was so sure that it had to be done. And he vacillated so much. I felt as I've never felt before against him, that he couldn't always be right, that he must have made mistakes in the past, and would again. And—this was something which only the women could decide. *I* believed the women of the world would want to know the truth. But I was wrong. They've had more pain and suffering in the past few days than in their whole normal lives. When I told the women of the world that there was a real risk that they would never bear children again there was such anguished weeping everywhere. It was a terrible mistake, and I betrayed Sap.'

'Joyce,' Maddern said. 'Oh, Joyce.'

His hands moved round her and he drew her towards him and comforted her, while down on Earth the women cried, some aloud but most in silence, until woman after woman began to say the same thing, all over the world.

'I would rather die than have no children.'

'*I would rather die*.'

This wail, and it was a wail indeed, grew louder as the hours passed. It reached Palfrey's ears when he was back in London. He landed in the capsule in Green Park, opposite the Élite Hotel, beneath which was Z5's headquarters. He heard it as he crossed Piccadilly towards the side street which led to the hotel. He heard it in the lobby of the hotel, from the old as well as the young, and he heard it when he stepped out of the elevator at the Operations Room. For messages were being relayed from all parts of the world – messages of anguish.

Palfrey went along to his own room, acutely aware of the fact that Joyce wasn't here; it was amazing how much he had come to depend on her, to trust her.

Then he opened the door to his own apartment and saw Azran sitting in his big chair, legs tucked up beneath her, sipping a cool drink. She did not get up when he entered, but smiled brightly at him.

'I am to wait with you until you have the replies,' she said. 'And I have one other instruction from the Master.'

'Oh, have you?' asked Palfrey gruffly. 'What is it?'

'He wishes you to find out who released the news and so forced this situation so quickly. If he finds out, he will kill the traitor.'

'I can understand it,' Palfrey said. 'I think I would kill him myself, too.'

‘What am I going to do?’ sobbed Joyce. ‘What am I going to do?’

‘Don’t worry,’ Maddern tried to reassure her. ‘It can’t be undone now.’

‘But because of it the world might die,’ Joyce said, and utter despair sounded in her voice. It did not matter what Maddern said, he could not comfort her.

Reports soon came to Palfrey of a tremendous battery of space probing from all over the world, and he had no doubt at all that stupendous efforts were being made by the space nations to find Nega. But so far there was not the slightest hint of success, and he was terrified of what the Master would do if he thought Nega was in danger.

But no one would heed him if he, Palfrey, bade them stop.

The first decision reached Palfrey that evening, from a small African state.

‘We shall submit,’ its government stated.

There was a lull for nearly twenty-four hours before the next reply came from one of the larger but economically poor countries in South America.

‘We submit,’ the leaders said.

They began to come in with much greater frequency from then on, until it looked as if all the world’s nations would have replied within the four days’ grace Palfrey had won for them. And one after another reply was the same. There was no fight in the nations, no hope. This situation was completely beyond control, even beyond their understanding.

At last, came Britain’s reply.

‘We submit, without conditions,’ Hartwall said.

Soon afterwards, came Thailand’s.

‘We are submitting under strong protest.’

Now the replies began to come in thick and fast, until on the evening of the third day only seven nations had not replied. Three were of little account, but four were significant.

These were the United States, the U.S.S.R., China and Japan.

Any one of these was large enough to change the course of events. Each was large enough to attempt to fight the Master without help from any other nation.

No word came from Nega.

Azran followed Palfrey everywhere but interfered with nothing and was oblivious to much that he did.

And Palfrey prepared for his return trip to the satellite, with the help of one Z5 agent, whose job it was to get Palfrey safely on the capsule loaded with high explosives which would pulverise the satellite into particles floating in space.

Chapter Nineteen

THE FOURTH DAY

On the morning of the fourth day, the Republic of China submitted, without conditions but with a lengthy explanation of why they had decided not to resist. Summed up, this showed that at least half the women of China were already affected, and Peking could see no way of existing alone.

At midday, the United States submitted. Palfrey read the laconic note from Washington which came over the computer with Azran at his shoulder. The note read '*We can see nothing to be gained by standing alone.*'

At two o'clock in the afternoon of the fourth day, word came from the Kremlin, terse and final.

'We submit for the sake of the living.'

Azran read this slowly. Once full understanding dawned she jumped up and down in delight, showing more excitement and emotion than Palfrey had ever seen in her.

'It is wonderful, Sap! It is over! The Master has won without a great disaster.'

'It looks like it,' Palfrey admitted, grudgingly.

'You cannot believe that such men are lying!' she cried.

'I would like to stay here and check,' Palfrey said, gruffly. They were in his apartment looking out on to simulated sunlight. Azran, at his desk, was slim delight. As he had come to know her he had come to appreciate the perfection of her features and her figure more, but he had not come to admire anything at all about her mind. In some ways she behaved like a child, as indeed she did on this fourth day of the ultimatum. 'And I would like Joyce Morgan here with me, too.'

'And Dr. Maddern?'

'If it is possible,' Palfrey said.

He did not dream that the Master would agree. He took it for granted that if he made it obvious that he wanted to stay here, then he would be ordered to go to the satellite. He was ready, now, with a plastic compound of extreme destructive power. He could carry it in powdered form, with a mixture of a cyclamate to give it a sweet taste. He had carried some of this about with him in other crises, and he had no doubt of its effectiveness. In a few hours the fourth day would be over and he would have to go back to the satellite, it was as simple as that.

He had no more arrangements to make. His will, with bequests to Joyce and Stefan as well as a few friends, was always in order. He had only a few very distant relatives for his wife Drusilla and their only son had perished in the great drought which had once threatened the future of the world. Most of the personnel at headquarters were comparatively young and new – he was venerated by many of them and he liked most, in turn, but there was a

wide age gap, and with Joyce away, the place seemed unfamiliar.

There was tension among the younger married men, and he had no doubt at all of the way they were feeling about the capitulation, but not one had come to him pleading for a chance to fight back. It was as if the staff of Z5 accepted the situation with dogged resignation. Although reports of more affected areas kept coming in, they were all quite objective, and there was none of the usual emotional appeal, 'What can we do?'

Palfrey told no one what he intended to do.

As the day wore on he became more and more anxious to hear from the Master. If anything happened to prevent him from going back to Nega, then there would be no hope at all.

As that thought went through his mind, Azran came into the big room with its simulated sunlight. He was at the desk. She went across and sat in a huge armchair, one large enough for Stefan Andromovitch to sit in comfort. She loved sitting in this chair, legs tucked under her, eating chocolate mints to which Maddern had introduced her. She sat on her legs, skirt spread out like a fan, beautifully shaped legs slightly sunburned. She glowed with health and with a kind of happiness which was new to her.

'There are advantages in being a Terrestrial human,' she remarked simply. 'There is more pleasure.' She took a wafer-thin mint from its wrapping. 'Will you have one?'

Palfrey pushed back his chair and looked at her, and he realised that she was about the age that his son had been when he had died.

'No thanks,' he said. 'Have you heard from the Master?'

'Yes, Sap! I have just heard. He would like to know how long you will need to stay on Earth? A week? Two weeks?'

My God, thought Palfrey, he's prepared to let me stay! He felt a surge of panic but concealed it. Everything depended on his going back, with the explosive, quickly. *Everything.*

He said, 'At least a week.'

'He is agreeable on two conditions,' announced Azran. She finished the mint and picked up another, carefree and at home. 'First, that you will make room here at Z5 for six Celestial humans and will teach them what happens here. He wishes to make sure that these headquarters will remain in service if anything should happen to you.'

Palfrey mumbled, 'That's reasonable enough.'

'The other is that you and Joyce and Dr. Maddern will stay here until the work is finished—will not go away from these quarters. If you do, he will seek out and kill you,' she announced simply. 'But you will stay, won't you?'

Palfrey's heart was hammering but he made himself say, 'Yes.'

'Then that is all,' she said, and added with a moue of disappointment, 'I am sorry only that I shall not be allowed to stay on Earth during this period.' A glint showed in her eyes. 'The Master says that I am enjoying the fruits of the Earth too much! But I will come back.' She slid another mint out of its packet and popped it into her mouth. 'Joyce and Dr. Maddern will arrive here at one hour after midnight,' she announced. 'And I am to return in the

capsule which brings them.'

He felt almost as if a cold hand was clutching him, and his expression made her sit upright and exclaim, 'Sap! Are you all right?'

He gulped. 'Ah—yes,' he said. 'Yes. I'm fine. Fine.'

'I thought you had what is called here a heart attack,' she said, relaxing. 'Celestial humans suffer no such illnesses, physically we are perfect. We do not grow old in the way you do, either. Sap, *are* you all right?'

'Yes,' he repeated more roughly. 'Yes, of course.' He stood up. 'I have to go to the Operations Room. Will you stay here and make some coffee?'

'Of course,' Azran promised.

He went out.

He did not go to the Operations Room but walked about the headquarters in a strange agony of mind. He knew what he would have to do, of course. And it would be easy. He would send the explosive with Azran, in one of the chocolate mints she liked so much. Yet he hated to. Celestial human being or not violent or not she was like a child. Now, she trusted him absolutely. So did the Master. It was strange that they were so simple and trusting. They *were* purified, in the sense that the causes of moral evil had been removed from them. The duplicity, the deviousness, the Machiavellian nature of Terrestrial man, had disappeared with their breeding and with their training. In a way they were as innocent as babes.

As innocent as babes.

He went to the commissary where all kinds of chocolates and sweets could be bought, and then in a laboratory inserted a tiny knife blade, scraped out the mint cream in three of them, and replaced it with the explosive paste.

It would go off when she placed it in her mouth.

He wrestled with his thoughts until it was nearly midnight, then went back and found Azran already drinking coffee, and eating chocolate biscuits from a dish on his desk. Her eyes were glowing, she was enjoying these so much.

'Is everything still all right?' she was eager to know.

'Everything is fine,' Palfrey assured her painfully.

'And you will be glad when I come back again?'

'Oh, very glad,' he asserted and made himself ask, 'Will you be glad to see me?'

'Yes,' she replied eagerly. 'I know they have many, many defects but I *like* Terrestrial human beings. I shall discuss this discovery with the Master, and he will no doubt explain. There is something different, something *kind* about them. How shall I say it? You have feelings. You have love of other people. In Dr. Maddern it is very noticeable. In Joyce, perhaps, less so. And in everyone I have met, it is true to some degree. Do you know what I mean?'

'Yes,' said Palfrey. 'Indeed I do.'

Less than an hour later, in Green Park not far from the Ritz Hotel and opposite the Élite Hotel built over the headquarters of Z5, Joyce and Maddern stepped out of a space capsule. Almost immediately Azran moved

towards it. As she turned she stood on tiptoe and kissed Palfrey lightly on the cheek.

Then, she stood in the doorway, waving, her small pack of Earth souvenirs and chocolate mints clutched in her other hand.

Then, she disappeared as the doors closed.

Then, the capsule took off, almost without a sound, and Palfrey stared towards the stars until it, too, disappeared.

'Sap,' Joyce said, in a hurt voice. 'What is it?'

'Nothing,' Palfrey assured her. 'I'm just very tense.'

'Sap, I *did* believe it was the right thing to do.'

'I'm sure you did,' Palfrey muttered. 'It makes no difference now.'

'Sap—please, *please* don't hate me for releasing the story.'

'I can't even blame you at all,' Palfrey said. 'I was dreadfully tempted myself. But—' For the first time in the past five or six hours, he was able to get his mind off Azran. 'You know you can't stay with Z5.'

'I know,' she said. 'You could never trust me again.'

'I could trust you,' Palfrey assured her. 'But I could never swear to the national authorities that I knew of no disloyalty among the staff of Z5.' He closed his eyes. 'I shall miss you very much.'

'I hope you will,' she said, with a twisted smile. 'I shall miss you, Sap, but —'

'Not so much,' Palfrey said.

'In a way, not so much,' she agreed.

'Reggie?'

'We are—we *are* attracted to each other.'

'Will you marry?'

'Yes.'

'And what will you do?'

'For a while, travel,' she answered. 'And then settle down to helping those who grow old before we do.' She moved forward and touched Palfrey's hand very gently. 'Sap, are you really all right?'

'I hate what I've had to do,' he said.

'There wasn't any other chance. You must know that.'

'I know,' Palfrey agreed. 'I know.'

How could he tell her that the real and vivid picture in his mind was Azran? How could he tell her, or anyone in the world, that the Master's planet could blow up at any moment? If anyone had the faintest idea of that and the Master found out, he might be able to save the satellite yet. No one must know until it was over, and it might be days or even weeks before he could possibly be sure.

'Sap,' Joyce said, 'the strain has been too much for you.'

'I'm half-inclined to believe you're right,' mumbled Palfrey.

'Will you take a rest?' When he didn't answer Joyce went on, 'If it would help, I would stay here and brief everyone else. And I could send for you in an emergency.'

Palfrey gave her a hug.

'Bless you,' he said, 'but no. You start the new life, Joyce my love. It will be a good one, please God. I'll ask Stefan to come and take over in London while I visit our main agencies abroad and combine some business with pleasure. Stefan was quite right. London is too often the centre of operations, we don't use the overseas headquarters enough.'

'Will you start at once?' asked Joyce, anxiously.

'Soon,' he promised.

She stared at him, puzzled again, then took both of his hands in hers. She had never looked more attractive, and in spite of her obvious anxiety over him, there was a glow, a promise of radiance, in her eyes.

'Sap, there's something very much the matter. What is it?'

'When I can tell you I'll tell you,' he promised, gripping her hands. 'And no, it has nothing to do with you.'

She left him and told Maddern all that he had said, and they speculated, while Palfrey waited hour by anguished hour. It was on the morning of the third day after Azran had gone when he went into the Observation Room and sensed a mood of excitement, rare since the wholesale capitulation. Had Joyce been here, he would have called her; as it was he had slept fairly well and felt quite able to cope.

'What's on?' he asked a young man above one of the computer-controls.

'No one's quite sure.' The answer came with tense excitement. 'But the great telescopes make it seem like a war between two galaxies! There was an explosion of unusual violence and rage beyond the moon during the night and dozens of smaller but equally bright explosions all around in space. The furthest away was about two million miles, the nearest only two hundred thousand. Everyone is desperately anxious to know what it is.'

Chapter Twenty

THE NEW BIRTH

The newspapers, eager for something which would take the minds of their readers off the capitulation to the Master, made tremendous play with the explosions.

> WAR BETWEEN THE PLANETS! ran one headline.
> WAR IN SPACE, screamed another.
> NUCLEAR WAR IN THE HEAVENS, cried a third.
> IS A NEW GALAXY BORN, questioned a fourth.
> DID A PLANET BLOW UP? demanded both the London and the New York *Times*.

Tidings of the explosions poured into Z5 headquarters together with demands for an explanation. At Cape Kennedy, Houston, Woomera and Jodrell Bank as well as space centres in Russia and China, reporters hurled question after question at scientists who could explain little if anything.

Palfrey assessed all the reports, as slowly and deliberately as he could.

Joyce stayed, to help.

Stefan Andromovitch was in hourly touch from Moscow. Others were in hourly touch from New York, Tokyo, Peking, in fact all the world's capitals. Palfrey made no statement but waited until midday passed, and there was no word from the Master. He held on until midnight, and when there was still no word he sent messages in code to all the governments of the world. Could they have delegates, ready to listen to a shortwave broadcast he would make from Z5 headquarters at twelve noon, next day—British Standard Time. Only half an hour before noon did he call Joyce, Maddern and some department leaders to his apartment.

'I have news,' he said evenly. 'Better news than any of us dared hope. I can tell you that the space explosions were started off by the destruction of the manmade satellite Nega, which set off a series of chain reaction explosions in its own family of satellites. Nega was the planet from which the *Nega* waves struck the Earth and created barrenness among so many women. As I understood it from the ruler, called the Master, of Nega, the effect of the waves would last a year at most. Everything else he told me has proved true, and there is every reason to believe this is true, also. There is no danger to anyone not already affected, and after a year even those who were affected will be able to bear children again. I have not discovered how the waves caused the de-fertilising effect. I am convinced that the waves did come from a manmade galaxy, and I have every reason to believe that a similar attack could have been made from anywhere on Earth or in space.'

Even here, among these Z5 agents who dealt in their daily lives with

threats and disaster, many were choked with emotion. When Palfrey made his sound broadcast, there was a strange sense of emotional reaction even among those who listened. As he finished, a call came for him from the American Ambassador in London.

'Yes, Mr. Kerr?'

'Is this one hundred per cent certain, Palfrey?'

'Yes, sir,' Palfrey stated.

'Can you tell me how the *Nega* satellite was destroyed?'

'No, sir,' Palfrey answered.

'But it is good enough to broadcast to the American people?'

'To all people,' Palfrey assured him quietly. 'I think it wants doing by national leaders. I hope our Prime Minister, possibly the Queen, will broadcast in England.'

He rang off, slowly.

A hundred people rang Z5, wanting to know the same thing as the American Ambassador, and once the news was broken—in England by the Prime Minister—the Press wanted to know *how*.

'Was it your doing, Palfrey?' A man asked at a crowded Press Conference in the Élite Hotel.

'How was it done?'

'Did you know there was a chance?'

'Did you do it, Palfrey? If you did, you ought to tell the world.'

'You owe it to the world—' a man began.

'Any debt I ever owed to the world I've paid,' Palfrey said heavily.

'No one could ever pay the debt the world owes Palfrey,' a man called.

'At last someone has some sense,' Joyce spoke very clearly.

Someone began to clap. Someone began to sing '*For he's a jolly good fellow'*. Everyone began to take up the refrain, in tens, in hundreds. The room was filled to overflowing and soon everyone was singing:

> For he's a jolly good fell-el-ow
> And so say all of us!

It was as if they had all become young again. And as naive as the Master.

Afterwards, Palfrey, Joyce and Maddern were together in a room at the Élite Hotel, the first time they had been free since Palfrey had made the announcement. There was a curiously subdued mood while they ate cold ham and beef, melon and cheese and biscuits on a balcony which overlooked Green Park, the very spot from which Azran had taken off on her last flight.

'Sap,' Joyce said, 'did Azran take the explosive up?'

Palfrey looked at her with pain in his eyes. Soon, he found his voice.

'I had expected to have to do it myself. I was fully prepared. Then the Master agreed that I could stay on Earth another week and that she should go back. She thought he feared that she was beginning to enjoy the fruits of

the Earth too much. I would have gone,' he declared. 'I would have blown you two up with it if that had been the only way. But it wasn't because the Master came to trust me.'

'Sap,' Joyce said, huskily. 'We have to evolve, but his way wasn't even the right beginning. You know that. I wish—I wish with all my heart that you could help to look for the right way. You're always working against the megalomaniacs who think they've found it, but if anyone ever does find it, it will probably be you.'

Palfrey gave a funny little laugh.

'Not I,' he said. 'I'm not a creator, even of ideas. I'm really the world's greatest obstructionist.' He began to twist a few strands of hair about his forefinger. 'I don't believe I'll ever start anything,' he went on, 'but one day I might find a man or woman who has the right ideas. If ever I do I might be able to help them. Z5 might be able to, too.'

'I'm not so sure you're right,' Maddern said. 'Sap, I would just like to say this—knowing you makes me feel there's much more hope for mankind than I'd ever dreamed.'

Joyce and Maddern married a few days later . . .

And nearly two years after they were married, Palfrey received a telegram:

> Stanislaus Alexander Maddern is now an hour old stop Mother and son both doing well will you please be his godfather?

In a private ward at the Middlecombe Cottage Hospital Maggie Cray finished washing the baby, looked at it with love and then turned into the main maternity ward. There in a corner Jane Gunnison was nursing her newborn child, and others who had been among the first afflicted by *Nega* waves were suckling their young. In another room Belinda Compton was looking down at her firstborn, eager and happy, all the fears behind her, all the trials and the problems, the love and the pain, the pride and the heartache of motherhood ahead.

All over Britain and all over the world, children were being born again.

Series Information

Published or to be published by
House of Stratus

Dates given are those of first publication

Gideon Series

(Writing as JJ Marric)

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Gideon's Day *(Gideon of Scotland Yard) (1955)*
2. Seven Days to Death *(Gideon's Week) (1956)*
3. Gideon's Night *(1957)*
4. Gideon's Month *(1958)*
5. Gideon's Staff *(1959)*
6. Gideon's Risk *(1960)*
7. Gideon's Fire *(1961)*
8. A Conference for Assassins *(Gideon's March) (1962)*
9. Travelling Crimes *(Gideon's Ride) (1963)*
10. An Uncivilised Election *(Gideon's Vote) (1964)*
11. Criminal Imports *(Gideon's Lot) (1965)*
12. Gideon's Badge *(1966)*
13. From Murder to a Cathedral *(Gideon's Wrath) (1967)*
14. Gideon's River *(1968)*
15. Gideon's Power *(1969)*
16. Gideon's Sport *(1970)*
17. Gideon's Art *(1971)*
18. Gideon's Men *(1972)*
19. Gideon's Press *(1973)*
20. Gideon's Fog *(1975)*
21. Gideon's Drive *(1976)*
22. Vigilantes & Biscuits *(Gideon's Force) (1978)*

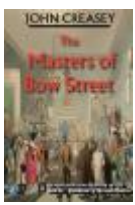
Other Series by John Creasey

Published or to be published by
House of Stratus

Dates given are those of first publication
Alternative titles in brackets

'Department 'Z" (28 titles)
'Dr. Palfrey Novels' (34 titles)
'Inspector West' (43 titles)
'Sexton Blake' (5 titles)
'The Baron' (47 titles) (writing as Anthony Morton)
'The Toff' (59 titles)

along with:



The Masters of Bow Street
This epic novel embraces the story of the Bow Street Runners and the Marine Police, forerunners of the modern police force, who were founded by novelist Henry Fielding in 1748. They were the earliest detective force operating from the courts to enforce the decisions of magistrates. John Creasey's account also gives a fascinating insight into family life of the time and the struggle between crime and justice, and ends with the establishment of the Metropolitan Police after the passing of Peel's Act in 1829.

'The Toff' Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Introducing the Toff *(It's the Toff!) (1938)*
2. The Toff Goes On *(1939)*
3. The Toff Steps Out *(1939)*

4. Here Comes the Toff *(1940)*
5. The Toff Breaks In *(1940)*
6. Salute the Toff *(1941)*
7. The Toff Proceeds *(1941)*
8. The Toff Goes to Market *(1942)*
9. The Toff Is Back *(1942)*
10. The Toff on the Trail *(short stories) (1942)*
11. The Toff among the Millions *(1943)*
12. Accuse the Toff *(1943)*
13. The Toff and the Deadly Parson *(The Toff and the Curate) (1944)*
14. The Toff and the Great Illusion *(1944)*
15. Feathers for the Toff *(1945)*
16. The Toff and the Lady *(1946)*
17. Poison for the Toff *(The Toff on Ice) (1946)*
18. Hammer the Toff *(1947)*
19. The Toff in Town *(1948)*
20. The Toff Takes Shares *(1948)*
21. The Toff and Old Harry *(1949)*
22. The Toff on Board *(1949)*
23. Fool the Toff *(1950)*
24. Kill the Toff *(1950)*
25. A Knife for the Toff *(1951)*
26. A Mask for the Toff *(The Toff Goes Gay) (1951)*
27. Hunt the Toff *(1952)*
28. Call the Toff *(1953)*
29. The Toff Down Under *(Break the Toff) (1953)*
30. Murder Out of the Past *(short stories) (1953)*
31. The Toff at Camp *(The Toff at Butlins) (1954)*
32. The Toff at the Fair *(1954)*
33. A Six for the Toff) *(A Score for the Toff) (1955)*
34. The Toff and the Deep Blue Sea *(1955)*
35. Kiss the Toff) *(Make-Up for the Toff) (1956)*
36. The Toff in New York *(1956)*
37. Model for the Toff *(1957)*
38. The Toff on Fire *(1957)*
39. The Toff and the Stolen Tresses *(1958)*
40. Terror for the Toff *(The Toff on the Farm) (1958)*
41. Double for the Toff *(1959)*
42. The Toff and the Runaway Bride *(1959)*
43. A Rocket for the Toff *(1960)*
44. The Toff and the Kidnapped *(The Kidnapped Child) (1960)*
45. Follow the Toff *(1961)*
46. The Toff and the Toughs *(The Toff and the Teds) (1961)*
47. A Doll for the Toff *(1963)*
48. Leave It to the Toff *(1963)*
49. The Toff and the Spider *(1965)*

50. The Toff in Wax *(1966)*
51. A Bundle for the Toff *(1967)*
52. Stars for the Toff *(1968)*
53. The Toff and the Golden Boy *(1969)*
54. The Toff and the Fallen Angels *(1970)*
55. Vote for the Toff *(1971)*
56. The Toff and the Trip-Trip-Triplets *(1972)*
57. The Toff and the Terrified Taxman *(1973)*
58. The Toff and the Sleepy Cowboy *(1975)*
59. The Toff and the Crooked Copper *(1977)*

Inspector West Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Inspector West Takes Charge *(1942)*
2. Go Away to Murder *(Inspector West Leaves Town) (1943)*
3. An Apostle of Gloom *(Inspector West At Home) (1944)*
4. Inspector West Regrets *(1945)*
5. Holiday for Inspector West *(1946)*
6. Battle for Inspector West *(1948)*
7. The Case Against Paul Raeburn *(Triumph for Inspector West) (1948)*
8. Inspector West Kicks Off *(Sport for Inspector West) (1949)*
9. Inspector West Alone *(1950)*
10. Inspector West Cries Wolf *(The Creepers) (1950)*
11. The Figure in the Dusk *(A Case for Inspector West) (1951)*
12. The Dissemblers *(Puzzle for Inspector West) (1951)*
13. The Case of the Acid Throwers *(The Blind Spot; Inspector West at Bay) (1952)*
14. Give a Man a Gun *(A Gun for Inspector West) (1953)*
15. Send Inspector West *(1953)*
16. So Young, So Cold, So Fair *(A Beauty for Inspector West; The Beauty Queen Killer) (1954)*
17. Murder Makes Haste *(Inspector West Makes Haste; The Gelignite Gang; Night of the Watchman) (1955)*
18. Murder: One, Two, Three *(Two for Inspector West) (1955)*
19. Death of a Postman *(Parcels for Inspector West) (1956)*
20. Death of an Assassin *(A Prince for Inspector West) (1956)*
21. Hit and Run *(Accident for Inspector West) (1957)*
22. The Trouble at Saxby's *(Find Inspector West; Doorway to Death) (1957)*
23. Murder, London - New York *(1958)*
24. Strike for Death *(The Killing Strike) (1958)*
25. Death of a Racehorse *(1959)*

26. The Case of the Innocent Victims *(1959)*
27. Murder on the Line *(1960)*
28. Death in Cold Print *(1961)*
29. The Scene of the Crime *(1961)*
30. Policeman's Dread *(1962)*
31. Hang the Little Man *(1963)*
32. Look Three Ways at Murder *(1964)*
33. Murder, London - Australia *(1965)*
34. Murder, London - South Africa *(1966)*
35. The Executioners *(1967)*
36. So Young to Burn *(1968)*
37. Murder, London - Miami *(1969)*
38. A Part for a Policeman *(1970)*
39. Alibi for Inspector West *(1971)*
40. A Splinter of Glass *(1972)*
41. The Theft of Magna Carta *(1973)*
42. The Extortioners *(1974)*
43. A Sharp Rise in Crime *(1978)*

'The Baron' Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Meet the Baron *(The Man in the Blue Mask) (1937)*
2. The Baron Returns *(The Return of the Blue Mask) (1937)*
3. The Baron Again *(Salute Blue Mask) (1938)*
4. The Baron at Bay *(Blue Mask at Bay) (1938)*
5. Alias the Baron *(Alias Blue Mask) (1939)*
6. The Baron at Large *(Challenge Blue Mask!) (1939)*
7. Versus the Baron *(Blue Mask Strikes Again) (1940)*
8. Call for the Baron *(Blue Mask Victorious) (1940)*
9. The Baron Comes Back *(1943)*
10. A Case for the Baron *(1945)*
11. Reward for the Baron *(1945)*
12. Career for the Baron *(1946)*
13. The Baron and the Beggar *(1947)*
14. Blame the Baron *(1948)*
15. A Rope for the Baron *(1948)*
16. Books for the Baron *(1949)*
17. Cry for the Baron *(1950)*
18. Trap the Baron *(1950)*
19. Attack the Baron *(1951)*
20. Shadow the Baron *(1951)*
21. Warn the Baron *(1952)*

22. The Baron Goes East *(1953)*
23. The Baron in France *(1953)*
24. Danger for the Baron *(1953)*
25. The Baron Goes Fast *(1954)*
26. Nest-Egg for the Baron *(Deaf, Dumb and Blonde) (1954)*
27. Help from the Baron *(1955)*
28. Hide the Baron *(1956)*
29. The Double Frame *(Frame the Baron) (1957)*
30. Blood Red *(Red Eye for the Baron) (1958)*
31. If Anything Happens to Hester *(Black for the Baron) (1959)*
32. Salute for the Baron *(1960)*
33. The Baron Branches Out *(A Branch for the Baron) (1961)*
34. The Baron and the Stolen Legacy *(Bad for the Baron) (1962)*
35. A Sword for the Baron *(The Baron and the Mogul Swords) (1963)*
36. The Baron on Board *(1964)*
37. The Baron and the Chinese Puzzle *(1964)*
38. Sport for the Baron *(1966)*
39. Affair for the Baron *(1967)*
40. The Baron and the Missing Old Masters *(1968)*
41. The Baron and the Unfinished Portrait *(1969)*
42. Last Laugh for the Baron *(1970)*
43. The Baron Goes A-Buying *(1971)*
44. The Baron and the Arrogant Artist *(1972)*
45. Burgle the Baron *(1973)*
46. The Baron - King Maker *(1975)*
47. Love for the Baron *(1979)*

Doctor Palfrey Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Traitor's Doom *(1942)*
2. The Legion of the Lost *(1943)*
3. The Valley of Fear *(The Perilous Country) (1943)*
4. Dangerous Quest *(1944)*
5. Death in the Rising Sun *(1945)*
6. The Hounds of Vengeance *(1945)*
7. Shadow of Doom *(1946)*
8. The House of the Bears *(1946)*
9. Dark Harvest *(1947)*
10. The Wings of Peace *(1948)*
11. The Sons of Satan *(1948)*
12. The Dawn of Darkness *(1949)*
13. The League of Light *(1949)*

14. The Man Who Shook the World *(1950)*
15. The Prophet of Fire *(1951)*
16. The Children of Hate *(The Killers of Innocence; The Children of Despair) (1952)*
17. The Touch of Death *(1954)*
18. The Mists of Fear *(1955)*
19. The Flood *(1956)*
20. The Plague of Silence *(1958)*
21. Dry Spell *(The Drought) (1959)*
22. The Terror *(1962)*
23. The Depths *(1963)*
24. The Sleep *(1964)*
25. The Inferno *(1965)*
26. The Famine *(1967)*
27. The Blight *(1968)*
28. The Oasis *(1970)*
29. The Smog *(1970)*
30. The Unbegotten *(1971)*
31. The Insulators *(1972)*
32. The Voiceless Ones *(1973)*
33. The Thunder-Maker *(1976)*
34. The Whirlwind *(1979)*

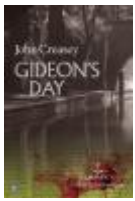
'Department Z' Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. The Death Miser *(1932)*
2. Redhead *(1934)*
3. First Came a Murder *(1934)*
4. Death Round the Corner *(1935)*
5. The Mark of the Crescent *(1935)*
6. Thunder in Europe *(1936)*
7. The Terror Trap *(1936)*
8. Carriers of Death *(1937)*
9. Days of Danger *(1937)*
10. Death Stands By *(1938)*
11. Menace! *(1938)*
12. Murder Must Wait *(1939)*
13. Panic! *(1939)*
14. Death by Night *(1940)*
15. The Island of Peril *(1940)*
16. Sabotage *(1941)*
17. Go Away Death *(1941)*

18. The Day of Disaster *(1942)*
19. Prepare for Action *(1942)*
20. No Darker Crime *(1943)*
21. Dark Peril *(1944)*
22. The Peril Ahead *(1946)*
23. The League of Dark Men *(1947)*
24. The Department of Death *(1949)*
25. The Enemy Within *(1950)*
26. Dead or Alive *(1951)*
27. A Kind of Prisoner *(1954)*
28. The Black Spiders *(1957)*

Select Synopses

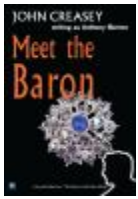


Gideon's Day
Gideon's day is a busy one. He balances family commitments with solving a series of seemingly unrelated crimes from which a plot nonetheless evolves and a mystery is solved. One of the most senior officers within Scotland Yard, George Gideon's crime solving abilities are in the finest traditions of London's world famous police headquarters. His analytical brain and sense of fairness is respected by colleagues and villains alike.

Gideon's Night
On this particular night Commander George Gideon has to deal with a couple of psychopaths who trail pain and blood in their wake. One targets infants, and the other young women on London's foggy streets. There's also an explosive gang war in the offing, and one way or another all of these cases are coming to their breathtaking conclusions at the same time. Can Scotland Yard's finest cope with such a nightmarish scenario, with what would ordinarily be months of time consuming police work crammed into just one night?

Gideon's Fire
Commander George Gideon of Scotland Yard has to deal successively with news of a mass murderer, a depraved maniac, and the deaths of a family in an arson attack on an old building south of the river. This leaves little time for the crisis developing at home . . .

Meet the Baron
John Mannering (*The Baron*) makes

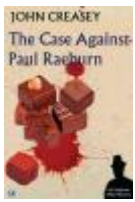


his first appearance in this volume. Lord Fauntley cannot help showing off both his daughter and the security under which his precious jewels are kept. Mannering finds himself attracted to both .... Money is tight and so he plans a burglary, but this fails and unexpected consequnces result. The relationship with Lorna Fauntley flourishes, and a series of high profile thefts and adventures ensure Mannering's future, so he believes, until Lorna equates him with *The Baron*. One of the many further twists in this award winning novel occurs when the police appear to seek Mannering's help, only to have everything turned upside down as the plot develops . . .

Shadow The Baron
John Mannering ('*The Baron*') is called in by Scorland Yard's Superintendent Bristow to help catch the mysterious jewel thief '*The Shadow*'. No one know the thief's identity, but he has managed to pull off many high profile robberies. However, as Mannering proceeds to track down the target, he finds the pursuer becomes the pursued . . . ..

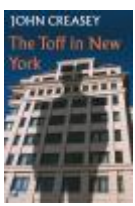
The House of the Bears
Standing alone in the bleak Yorkshire Moors is Sir Rufus Marne's *'House of the Bears'*. Dr. Palfrey is asked to journey there to examine an invalid - whom he finds has disappeared. Moreover, Marne's daughter lies terribly injured after a fall from the minstrel's gallery, which Dr. Palfrey discovers was no accident. He sets out to look into both matters, but the discoveries he makes are truly fantastic. A deserted mine, powerful explosive and a submarine all feature in this powerful mystery. The results are even capable of surprising him ...

Inspector West Takes Charge
Extortion is the name of the game, as one victim after another is ruthlessly targeted. Chief Inspector Roger West must now solve the problem, along with a tangle of murders - but the case becomes more frightening as every minute passes.



The Case Against Paul Raeburn
Chief Inspector Roger West has been watching and waiting for over two years - he is determined to catch Paul Raeburn out. The millionaire racketeer may have made a mistake, following the killing of a small time crook. Can the ace detective triumph over the evil Raeburn in what are very difficult circumstances? This cannot be assumed as not eveything, it would seem, is as simple as it first appears .....

Introducing The Toff
The Toff is the Hon. Richard Rollison; the ultimate sleuth who revels in solving crimes. Whilst returning home across the Essex countryside from a day's cricket at his father's Norfolk home, he happens upon an accident that sets him on a new trail. This involves murder, suspense and thrilling action as The Toff applies his mind with its usual precision and thoroughness.



The Toff in New York
'Say, Miss Hall, I hope that brother of yours hasn't run into any trouble.' But Will Hall had been kidnapped and the Honourable Richard Rollison, known by many by the apt if absurd soubriquet of the *'Toff'* is soon on the scene, but not before a murdered man had fallen into Valerie Hallís arms. There's lots of action in 'millionaire surroundings', with a rich private eye

and the NYPD all on the case, whilst the Toff tracks Dutch Himmy, surely the worst man in New York . . . ..

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